

# What has feminism ever done to you?

(Except threaten your sense of entitlement)



**A** couple of years ago, three female computer scientists from MIT decided to do a live Ask Me Anything (AMA) session on the popular internet platform Reddit. Their

intention, as they stated it, was to answer questions about "what our lives are like as PhD students at MIT's Computer Science and Artificial Intelligence Lab (CSAIL), and what we could do to get more young people excited about programming." During the course of the live AMA, they were asked to make sandwiches (because, of course, "women belong in the kitchen"), called out for introducing themselves as "women computer scientists" and not simply computer scientists, and even accused of leveraging the fact that they were women to get attention on the site. They were asked about their underwear and how often they copied their male classmates' answers. The three scientists, Elena Glassman, Neha Narula and Jean Yang, subsequently wrote an article for *Wired* addressing the treatment they received. "We decided to actively highlight the fact that we were three female computer scientists doing an AMA, to serve as role models in a field that's less than 20 percent female."

Of course, as any user of the internet knows, online harassment of women is not an isolated phenomenon. The anonymity that the internet provides has meant that from unsolicited proposals to outright sexual harassment, the 'creeps' get creepier when they are online. The internet is just an easier medium for this sexism and misogyny to unfold. And a very perverse part of it consists of accusing women, especially ones identifying with feminist ideologies, of either complaining too much, or as the three computer scientists were told, leveraging their 'womanhood'.

A few days ago, a post by a well-educated person (of course, male) came up on my newsfeed on Facebook. The post was hating on feminism and how it has gone all wrong because women in Bangladesh complain of 'manspreading.' For those not familiar with the

term, it refers to the practice of "sitting in public transport with legs wide apart, thereby covering more than one seat." His point was that this was not a real issue, and feminists who berate the practice are somehow a disgrace to the feminists who had fought for suffrage and equal rights. The comments in the post went on to argue how after the first and second wave of feminism, it had run out of

even here, as I have had the misfortune to overhear in buses, men complain about allocated seats for women, how they are given special treatment, and how they can get away with so much just because of their gender. Arguments such as this tend to boil down feminism to its most vitriolic: feminism is defined to be man-hating. Feminists are described as women who hate men, are

militant feminism, or spoken out for child-rearing are not even registered. The arguments usually start with "I have no problem with the feminism of the past but..." and end with how feminism today is completely unnecessary. As highlighted in the case of the computer scientists, it is assumed that talking about gender is completely uncalled for today. A much rarer argument goes in the line of

to. There is no gender equivalence in terms of the denigrating, hostile and sometimes exceedingly dangerous environmental effect that misogyny has, online or off. It has a long history and cannot be isolated from actual violence that we adapt to avoiding every day. The fact that violence has always suppressed women's free speech is only now becoming too obvious to ignore."

Because the issues faced by women are due to their gender, it is important to have feminism. Sure, women can vote today, but as 2016 reminded us, they also face much more hostility. And this is all the more reason why it is so much more shocking when feminism becomes a dreaded word, why many men find issues with the movement, to the point of asking for a similar movement, 'meninism.'

It seems to me that the whole trend of accusing women of getting it easy, while also claiming to be for women's equality (but not feminism) has something to do with men's sense of entitlement. Feminism is seen as a threat somehow, that it will take away certain entitlements (to make sexist jokes, to be insensitive in public, etc.). They cannot take back what feminist movements of the past had achieved (I bet they would be just as hostile to feminism if they had lived during the suffrage movement), but they can still spew out against the women today asking for more.

Sure, one can disagree with certain aspects of feminism (as with any ideology). One can critique it, add to it, and still stand for its core principles. The conversation and debate about sexual hierarchy, not only on official documents but how they play out in the social and political fields, is crucial today. The long history of the feminist movement has got us started to talk about gender, and the conversation needs to progress if true equality is to be achieved.

Or as a Reddit user pointed out in the AMA thread, calling out the hypocrisy of those complaining that the three women should not have mentioned their gender, "Don't worry guys - when the male dog groomer did his AMA (where he specifically identified as male), there were also dozens of comments asking why his sex mattered. Oh no, wait, there weren't."

The writer is a member of the Editorial team, *The Daily Star*.



SOURCE: MEDIA.SALON.COM

'real' issues and was now simply a mockery. These are just two examples, but one gets the gist of the issue. It assumes, now that women can vote and are entitled to equal rights, there is nothing for women to struggle for. But as any woman who has used public transport in Bangladesh will tell you, men taking up more than their fair share of seats (because many men are big and strong and take up space confidently) is a real issue. But

opposed to family values, or just seeking attention. The fundamental flaw with this argument is of course that it reduces feminism (as it does individual women to a homogenous whole) to one simple thing. The nuances of different ideologies and the specific problems in different cultures and communities are all thrown out the window. That many feminists themselves have critiqued 'choice feminism' or

"Sure, women are harassed, but a movement speaking solely for women and not for, say, the thousands of men killed in so and so, cannot be supported". It claims women are not the only ones with problems. But as an article on *The Economist* from 2014 about how more women face gender-specific harassment online reads: "Women take online harassment more seriously not because we are hysterics, but because we reasonably have

# Women working abroad: The sky is the limit



**I** was waiting for a taxi in front of the Dubai airport. Suddenly, I heard a woman taxi driver speaking in Bangla:

"Have you come from Bangladesh? Where do you want to go?" We were completely dumbfounded. We could never have imagined meeting a woman taxi driver in Dubai, let alone a Bangladeshi one. I felt so proud and delighted that a Bangladeshi female migrant worker had been earning her livelihood driving a taxi in this desert city for a full decade. She had brought her whole family to Dubai. I saluted Husna Begum, the taxi driver. And then I wondered—do I have the capability to fight and survive like her?

Shilpi worked for me as a household help for about 5-6 years. She continued her studies while working under the Open University. Her manners, dexterity, attitude were always perfect and most of all, very professional. We were very happy with her and tried our best to make her feel at home. When I came to know about the recruitment of female workers for Hong Kong, through my colleague working on migration issues, I immediately decided to send Shilpi. I thought she would be an ideal candidate to work abroad where she would no doubt earn a better living.

Then came all the running around from one office to another to get the paperwork done—passport, medical clearance, training, Probashi Kallyan Bank, and the recruitment agency. Finally, we got everything in order and one fine day she flew off to Hong Kong. From then she struggled ahead on her own. She was in an unknown country living in an unfamiliar environment where everything was alien to her - the language, food, culture. Worst of all, she had no one she knew, no one she could share her worries with. But Shilpi overcame all of that. All on her own. We only gave her the moral support.

She came back after two years to renew her contract. Her salary is now about Tk 45,000, with food, lodging and visits back home provided for by the employer. She speaks English and Cantonese there, and is now dreaming of finding a chance to work in Europe. Even we cannot think of that! A simple Bangladeshi young woman striving and surviving in a completely unknown country all alone - Shilpi is truly inspiring. Kudos to Shilpi. I still wonder, would I be able to survive like this in an unknown land?

Husna Begum and Shilpi are successful migrant workers despite being female. Actually, willpower, confidence, the willingness to work hard and adapt to new environments, the sincerity to follow the proper procedures of work abroad, and a supportive environment from employers in Bangladesh enable many women to seek employment abroad and improve their future and

that of their families. Shilpi's success has encouraged her sister Champa, and all her papers have been processed. Sultana, another sister, is next in line.

A report in the daily *Samakal* revealed that the total number of female migrant workers abroad crossed the 100,000 mark in 2015. It increased further in 2016. In fact, till November the figures for last year were already record-breaking, with more than 10 percent rise overall, without any special promotional or

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awareness campaigns on the opportunities of female migrants. The migration rates for women could be even higher with adequate government support. The government has not focused on this issue as much as they have on migration of male workers.

Unfortunately, the hurdles faced by female workers are just as plentiful as the opportunities. As a country, we started exploring the issue of female workers' migration quite late. The

issue is compounded by our conservative and patriarchal society, lack of education, and family pressure and responsibilities. Women here do not find it as easy to leave their families behind to work overseas as men do. Even the expat welfare minister has concurred on that.

There are also frequent allegations of abuse and violence inflicted on many female household workers recruited in the Middle East. Many women have escaped back home to

and finally, have enough support to migrate with safety.

Often the most important issue is the societal disapproval of women going abroad for work which becomes the biggest bar for prospective women migrant workers. It is extremely difficult to ignore such kinds of pressure. When village girls or women move to the city to work in homes or garment factories, their families are often stigmatised by the community. The guardians also face problems finding grooms for their daughters.

The government is already working on some initiatives to increase the number of female migrant workers, and ensure their security there. It has started a helpline and help service to protect against abuse in their workplace. It has arranged for female workers to contact home free of cost. Many female workers are now going to the Middle East as Saudi Arabia has reopened its labour market for us.

But now both the government and the recruitment agencies need to take more steps to utilise the opportunities. These include raising mass awareness on female worker migration; spreading information on the significantly lower costs of migration for women compared to men, e.g the cost of migrating to the Middle East is Tk 7-8 lakh for men, compared to just Tk 1.5 lakh for women; informing people on the accessibility of loans from the Probashi Kallyan Bank; making people understand that lower migrating costs means that women can contribute more to the family

and the country; informing people about improved working conditions and security abroad; arranging for shelter, counselling, and healthcare for workers in distress, along with legal support and provision of compensation.

No woman should be sent to work abroad against her will or without proper training.

Apart from the Middle East, Asian countries like Singapore, Indonesia, Malaysia, and the Philippines are among the many countries which source female household workers. We need to explore the laws in these countries. We also must increase our presence in the Hong Kong labour market. For this we need both government and private initiatives to train our women workers. We can also try and explore possible opportunities in Europe and Australia.

We want the women of Bangladesh to go all over the world for work, like Husna Begum and Shilpi, and lead dignified, financially stable lives. It is not just education where girls and women can excel but in terms of their contribution to the economy through their skills and hard work. It gives me immense pleasure when I see a compatriot, whether man or woman, not only survive in unfamiliar shores but become financially solvent, uplifting their families from poverty through their courage, hard work and diligence. I salute all our migrant brothers and sisters. We remain indebted to you.

The writer works in communications.

**QUOTABLE Quote**

**LAO TZU**  
ANCIENT CHINESE PHILOSOPHER AND WRITER

*Being deeply loved by someone gives you strength, while loving someone deeply gives you courage.*

**CROSSWORD BY THOMAS JOSEPH**

**ACROSS**

- Dress in
- Aid illegally
- Ship of 1492
- Cruise ship
- Rocker John
- Plain silly
- Arm supporters
- Mallowing place
- Ripped
- Comes to a point
- Have debts
- Baltimore player
- Church topper
- Game pieces
- Derby or boater
- Ring sport
- Coal source
- Writer Tan
- Playground fixtures
- Duo quadrupled
- Girder material
- 39 Spoken exams
- 40 Just
- 41 Periods

**DOWN**

- Droopy tree
- Whole
- Make amends
- Chimed
- Boxing great
- Storage site
- Tooth coating
- Prof's protection
- Basil-based sauce
- Cincinnati team
- Orchestra section
- Broadcasts
- "The Raven" writer
- Store sign
- Enjoy Aspen
- Soup choice
- Breathing need
- Suggest
- Anaheim team
- 28 Exams
- 29 Saloons
- 30 Small-scale
- 33 Lumber
- 35 Twisty fish
- 36 Cunning

**YESTERDAY'S ANSWER**

J	E	T	S	T	A	L	E	
A	X	I	O	M	T	I	D	E
N	O	R	S	E	E	L	V	E
I	D	A	N	A	P	E	W	E
S	U	N	G	O	B	B	R	A
S	A	N	T	A	B	A	B	A
A	T	P	A	R				
L	E	T	I	T	S	N	O	W
B	E	G	S	T	E	S	T	E
L	A	G	T	O	M	O	A	R
A	N	N	I	E	A	B	O	V
S	T	O	R	E	N	I	L	E
T	O	G	A	S	T	E	S	S

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