

# The faces of SEXISM

International Women's Day, widely observed all over the world on March 8, gives us an opportunity to celebrate womanhood in all its shapes, sizes, and colours. It is, however, equally important to address the harsh realities that are a part of every girl's journey. The women from different backgrounds and age groups interviewed here have shared the instances of gender-based injustice, prejudice, or downright harassment they have faced in their regular lives. The anonymity requested by nearly all of them is the loudest indicator of just how much their right to independence and free speech is still impeded by a society that likes to take pride in its strides towards progress. Celebration of women, and women's strength, on this occasion lies not in resting upon our laurels, but realising how much more still remains to be done in creating a safe and just society for all women in our country. The snippets of 'everyday sexism' revealed through this interview taken by Sarah Anjum Bari should serve as a reminder of that.

"THE chemistry teacher in my school publicly ridiculed me for obtaining poor marks on a test, and determined that the reason for my lack of intelligence was my sex. 'I can't actually blame you. Boys have better brains than girls. It is scientifically proven. I heard your parents are sending you to America. It is such a waste of money. After all, the ultimate destination for a woman is her husband's home,' he told me. I pray that he never has daughters."

A high school student

"I used to love riding a bicycle around my neighbourhood. People around the area protested that I ought to stop, because it's a 'boy's activity'; that I'm not physically strong enough to be playing with boys."

A nineteen-year-old student

"I have been told by my parents that as an unmarried, *bhalo ghorer meye*, it would be improper of me to travel without a male. It becomes an issue of family honour followed by the clichéd silver lining - 'You can go wherever and whenever you want with your husband.' But if a Bangladeshi man wants to travel alone, he can go anytime!"

A university student

"I rented a coaching centre apartment to open a martial arts training centre. The owner of the building complained that martial arts aren't meant for girls. I should be doing things meant for women only. He wouldn't let me put up banners or signs to promote my academy. I later moved to two other apartments where the landlords would come to the classes, scream in front of my students, and try to control my business because I am a 'girl' and I am 'weak.'"

A business graduate and martial arts instructor

"Being the only female cousin in my family, I am the target of most scrutiny at family gatherings. Despite doing great at school, and being affiliated with a newspaper, my extended family's interest focuses around my marriage, my clothing, and my mannerisms. My male cousins, who always skip out on family gatherings, are

and introduces himself to other male colleagues and walks away without acknowledging my existence. I understand how ironic this sounds, since women are always complaining about unwanted attention from men on the streets. But it's like they don't know how to just treat us as another human being."

Founder, Bonhishikha - unlearn gender

"I was working in a firm where, on a daily basis, I was asked why I wasn't getting married. I was told that there's no point of me working because I would eventually get a rich husband and receive 'monthly allowances' from him. They said that the divorce rate in Bangladesh is so high because women these days are getting too educated, which gives them the independence to leave their husbands when they are abused physically or refrained from an activity; this wouldn't be allowed in earlier times. They told me women should be submissive to their men. Meanwhile, my relatives keep advising me to get married because I am 25. If I wait much longer, I will become too ugly to attract men."

A barrister-at-law

"I used to receive online messages from male students calling me 'hot' and other such adjectives. On entering the classroom, I would be greeted with demeaning whistles and catcalls instead of a 'Good morning, teacher'. A student of the third grade had written that he wanted to sleep with me in his school diary. Once, while leaving the school premises, a male student came up and placed his hand behind me, with other students whispering, '*Dekhi tor bhabi jachhe*'. On making complaints about the incident, the school authority and the student's parents blamed me for my lack of professionalism. I was ultimately forced to quit."

A former high school teacher

"A senior lawyer at the court premises would always ask me, 'Shundori, how is your husband?' He knew very well that I was divorced at the time. He loved to see my embarrassment. Another very reputed lawyer once asked me to move and make space for him to sit. I hadn't realised that



ILLUSTRATION: MUSTAFA RAFID AMIN/THE MINIMALIST

celebrated for putting on wrinkled shirts and showing their faces."

A private university student

"My place of work lacks genuine commitment to the gendered needs of entry-level staff. It is expected that women's work will be identical to that of men, who do not face the same problems with security going back home late at night. Bringing up these issues is considered unprofessional. We are also harassed through uninvited flirtation and inappropriate comments. We have no place to report these grievances. The organisation is only now drafting a gender policy, but has no mechanisms in place to implement it."

A development professional

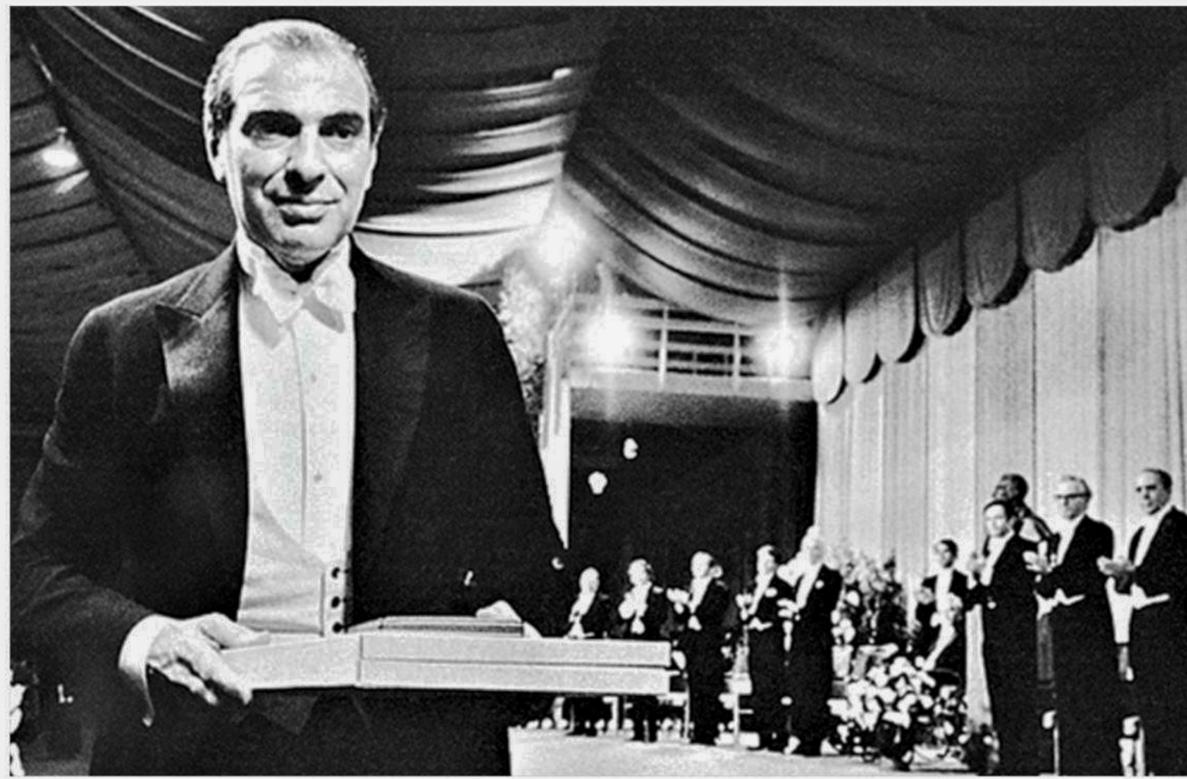
"A bunch of us were sitting on the balcony at a gathering, when a young man joined us. He introduced himself and shook hands with all the men sitting with us, even a young schoolboy. As he reached me and my sister, he turned back around and sat down at the other side of the circle. We might as well not have been there at all. Similar things have happened at workplaces too, where a male peer greets

he had been speaking to me. He got angry and threatened to sit on my lap if I didn't move! While I have always received respect from the courts, certain male lawyers have often subjected me to such regular instances of sexism at work."

A practising lawyer of the Bangladesh Supreme Court

"I was applying for a loan to buy an apartment for my mother. It was entirely my own affair, and it didn't involve my husband in any way. The form required the details and a signed permission from my husband. I enquired as to why this was required, given that a man would not be expected to get a signature from his wife for the same purposes. The bank employee explained that it was a formality mandated by the Bangladesh Bank. As an independent, successful businesswoman, I can manage to manoeuvre through such bureaucracies on my own. But what if I had been an underprivileged widow, or a woman with no close male relatives, in urgent need of a loan? What would a woman in such a situation do?"

A leading professional at a multinational company



Kenneth Arrow (1921-2017).

## TRIBUTE

# The influential theorist

SYED M. AHSAN

THIS February, the community of economists, the world over, learned of the death of an icon, Kenneth Joseph Arrow; tributes came pouring in from all corners. The youngest to date to have won the Economics Nobel in 1972, he surely was much more. At least five of his former students have gone on to win the Economics Nobel. Paul Samuelson (1915-2009, Nobel Laureate, 1970), his brother-in-law, had hailed Arrow as "the most important theorist of the 20th century in economics". Loved and revered by economists all over, Ken Arrow, however, had remained much of an unknown to the general public. Who exactly was Arrow and what did he do for mankind?

Born in New York City on August 23, 1921, Arrow grew up during the depth of the Great Depression. He majored in Mathematics from the City College of New York (now known as CUNY). He then went on to complete an MA in 1951, aged just 20, also in Mathematics from Columbia and decided to stay on for the doctorate there, this time in Economics, motivated by Harold Hotelling.

The war then interrupted and delayed Arrow's doctorate by many years (he had duly joined the military during 1942-46), but not his creativity. While on duty (research field), he published his first journal article, *On the Optimal Use of Winds for Flight Planning* (1943). The paper apparently dealt with how given the data, the wind forecast can be made more accurate and thus optimal flight formulas could be improved. But, his contribution was summarily dismissed by his boss: "The commanding general is well aware that the forecasts are no good. However, he needs them for planning purposes." (*The Washington Post*, February 21, 2017).

By the time he had finally earned his doctorate in Columbia in 1951, he had already made fundamental contributions in several areas of economic analysis including social choice, general equilibrium (GE) theory and risk-taking behaviour, and the 1972 Nobel could have in all fairness focused on any one of these fields. The actual Nobel award, however, focussed on the second of these: "... pioneering contributions to general economic equilibrium theory and welfare theory".

Although an astute topologist, few can better Arrow even in plain English. He thus summed up his work on GE analysis: "(...) In everyday normal experience, there is something of a balance between the amounts of goods and services that some individuals want to supply and the amounts that other, different individuals want to sell. Would-be buyers ordinarily count correctly on being able to carry out their intentions, and would-be sellers do not ordinarily find themselves producing great amounts of goods that they cannot sell. This experience of balance is indeed so widespread that it raises no intellec-

tual disquiet among laymen; they take it so much for granted that they are not supposed to understand the mechanism by which it occurs" (Arrow, 1974).

In other words, in a state of 'general equilibrium' when all markets were in balance, only 'hard choices' (such as if one were to gain even more, others may have to be hurt in the process) remained unexplored. Such is the limit of market mechanism.

The wider academia, however, relates Arrow's name with the most seminal of his work, namely that completed as part of his doctoral thesis, *Social Choice and Individual Values* (Wiley, 1951). The central contribution here, known as the Arrow Possibility Theorem focussed on the following question: "... how can it be possible to arrive at cogent aggregative judgements about the society ... given the diversity of preferences, concerns,

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and predicaments of the different individuals within the society? How can we find any rational basis of making such aggregative judgements as 'the society prefers this to that' or 'the society should choose this over that' or 'this is socially right?' (Amartya Sen, Nobel Lecture, 1998.)

And, the answer? In Arrow's own words, "... if we exclude the possibility of interpersonal comparisons of utility, then the only methods of passing from individual tastes to social preferences which will be satisfactory and which will be defined for a wide range of sets of individual orderings [rankings] are either imposed or dictatorial" (1950). Thus the bleak conclusion is that it is impossible to construct a social ranking that respects the underlying constituent ranking of all individuals.

The third strand of scholarship that Arrow had already pioneered by 1951 lay in the foundation of a theory of behaviour under conditions of risk. His insight was anchored in Frank Ramsey's (1930) illuminating conviction that even lacking objective information about future events (say weather), rational persons (e.g. farmers) do routinely take decisions based on their own subjective belief (based possibly on 'external knowledge'). This eventually led to a complete theory of risk-

averse behaviour. Simultaneously, he was led to investigate what became known as the economics of information, much of which dealt with complexities posed by the latter's incompleteness and imperfections.

Interestingly, it was left for President George Bush to acknowledge Arrow's monumental contribution to the understanding of risk and information by bestowing upon him the 2004 National Medal of Science, America's highest scientific honour.

Finally, we come to an area where a mere glimmer of Arrow's genius stands out starkly in the historicity of ideas. In a few short paragraphs in an essay dealing with the limits of the market mechanism, Arrow (1969) stressed the value, indeed the necessity, of 'social capital', as an enabling device improving upon economic efficiency. Though he did not name it as such, to my knowledge this piece happens to be the first such reference by an economist to the primacy of social capital, which sadly has gone largely unnoticed.

Before completing these words by way of a tribute, allow me to reflect on the humble nature of the man in his dealings with relative unknowns. Here, I record a letter I wrote to him in 1988 enclosing a draft paper where I extended one of his results on risk-averse behaviour in a context where the individual borrows the investment funds (instead of using his/her own savings). From the post-marks, he appeared to have replied almost the day he had received my paper, complimenting me on the derivations, but in the body of his letter, he managed to extend my analysis further by adding a few lines of algebra himself.

The last time I met Ken in person was in December 1995 in Tunis during the World Congress of International Economic Association (IEA), a weeklong event. One evening we were invited to a musical concert (actually performed by an orchestra based in Istanbul). Following the music, while walking over to a dinner arranged for the IEA Council, I caught up with Ken and asked him what he thought of the music. I prefaced by saying that to me it was striking that while all the tunes and melodies appeared very oriental, interestingly all instruments were those actually found in western classical orchestra (piano, violins, viola, cellos, harp, drums, etc). He surprised me by replying that he too was exactly thinking of that. I certainly had no clue of the evolution of Turkish music before and after the demise of the Ottoman Empire. I vaguely recall him reviewing precisely that which was most incomprehensible to me. He may have not proven any theorem on the General Possibility of Turkish Orchestral Music, but had certainly proffered quite a few solid hypotheses, not to speak of lemmas to boot. Thank you, Ken.

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