



“Recognising the women who are contributing to the nation building will inspire others to go forward. I will advise the state to take

HASANUL HAQ INU
INFORMATION MINISTER



“Many are working tirelessly for the development of this country. Of them, however, women's contribution is more than the men's because they have to

MOMINUL ISLAM
MANAGING DIRECTOR AND CEO,
IPDC FINANCE LIMITED



“Those who work in silence, behind the scene, should get more recognition.”

PARVEEN MAHMUD FCA
CHAIRPERSON, MICRO INDUSTRIES
DEVELOPMENT ASSISTANCE
AND SERVICES (MIDAS)



IGP AKM Shahidul Hoque, left, Information Minister Hasanul Haq Inu, second from left, MIDAS Chairperson Parveen Mahmud, second from right, and MD and CEO of IPDC Finance Ltd Mominul Islam, right, hand over a cheque to Rokeya Begum during the Unsung Women Nation Builders Awards at the Krishibid Institution Bangladesh yesterday. Singers perform at a cultural programme on the occasion, bottom left, and a section of the dignitaries present at the ceremony, bottom right.

PHOTO: PRABIR DAS



“Their examples in serving the community and helping fellow human beings make them superior to many of us. I hope this recognition inspires others to serve

MAHFUZ ANAM
EDITOR AND PUBLISHER OF THE DAILY STAR

Woman of green

FROM PAGE 1
Agriculture University in 2003. She has significant contribution in food sufficiency and climate change research.

Under her leadership BRRI has achieved international success. She has contributed in developing better breed of corn. She has 37 research articles published in national and international scientific journals.

WOMAN OF GREEN <http://bit.ly/2pFpirB>

An indomitable soul

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down with fever in 1996 and her hands and legs became paralysed. Therapy brought back the use of her hands but her legs did not improve.

Despite being paralyzed, she is by no means inferior to any other nurse in her hospital, her patients, superiors, and coworkers testify. She believes as long as she can use her hands, she can continue to help her patients in every way possible.

NIGHTINGALE OF NARAYANGANJ <http://bit.ly/2pFnAqd>

First female police officer

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additional inspector general of police.

“Firm in their belief that the police force was no place for women, they tried to make us leave from the very first day -- beginning with barring our entry at the orientation for new officers,” says Fatema. She was forced by her bosses to write to the home ministry asking it to give her a posting in some other cadre service.

After the training was over, the male officers were ordered to pack and go to the Police Academy. But there was no instruction for Fatema. She waited and waited, but no orders came. A couple of days later, she wrote to the Police Headquarters saying she would not give up her job and that she would rather wait further. She was allowed to go to the academy after she persisted.

FATEMA PERSISTED DESPITE CONSTANT TAUNTS <http://bit.ly/2qpWBEl>

Blindness no bar to teaching

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died leaving five daughters and one son. Three of the sisters are also blind. When her mother also died after a few years, their elder sister Sahanaj Begum took them in.

Now Rokeya's two blind sisters are in University. Shekha Begum, 29, is a student of MA in the Department of Social Science at Eden Mohila College Dhaka. Ashia Akter, 22, is a student of BA in the Department of History at Dhaka University.

“She is a really good teacher and also a good person,” said Kakoli Saha Head master of Tambulkhana Government Primary School. “She is meritorious and she has an indomitable spirit.”

WHERE THERE IS A WILL... <http://bit.ly/2p5M7BG>

Selfless midwife

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after birth. Relatives and acquaintances testify she looks after the mothers and children just as a grandmother would-- with utmost care and affection.

SAVIOUR OF EXPECTING MOTHERS <http://bit.ly/2p2Eb3q>

The light of Joypurhat

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price, she started to feel the problems children faced in those families. She felt children from the poorest of families should have a fair chance to go to school and having bright lights to study at night could boost their morale.

Nowadays, the three villages are collectively called “Solargram” and 148 families have solar lights because Likhan felt that she had to do something to help.

But bright lights are not enough. One also needs books. In March this year, Likhan visited her Solargram with bundles of children's books to be distributed for free. From solar lights to light of knowledge, Likhan has them all.

THE LIGHT OF JOYPURHAT <http://bit.ly/2pFb1v2>

Malala of Bangla

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village. Her elder sisters, all four of them, had given in without a protest when their time came. But Shorna did not. She was adamant that completing her education was her first priority.

It was her wholehearted campaign for girls' education in her village that put her on par with Malala Yousafzai. Although there were no gun-toting Taliban insurgents patrolling her village, hers was no less challenging a task than Malala's.

President of Gazipur's Mawna Union Shishu Forum of Plan Bangladesh, where she joined in 2006, Shorna is now a marriage-buster in her community and also an icon. She has stopped six child marriages in her union so far.

Shorna always took it upon herself to organise students for different events. She showed her leadership quality during those programmes. Shorna, who once wanted to be a doctor, now wants to serve the society by becoming a university or college teacher.

'MALALA OF BANGLA' BLAZES THE TRAIL <http://bit.ly/2p2DtMm>

Sing for the UNSUNG

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women at a packed auditorium of the Krishibid institution near Farmgate, acknowledging their unique contributions to the socio-economic development of the country.

Sonajan was awarded for her contribution to healthcare. The other awardees are: child rights activist Shahida Akhter Shorna (courageous act); Bhagya Rani Banik, director general of Bangladesh Rice Research Institute (agriculture); Fatema Begum, additional inspector general of police (courageous act); Rokeya Begum, assistant teacher of Tambulkhana Government Primary School (education); Maftahul Jannat Likhon (entrepreneurship); and senior nurse Irani Baroi (health).

An independent jury panel consisting of writer and the Daily Prothom Alo Associate Editor Anisul Hoque, Mohammadi Group Managing Director Rubana Huq, and ActionAid Bangladesh Country Director Farah Kabir selected the winners.

Information Minister Hasanul Haq Inu and Parveen Mahmud FCA, chairperson of the Micro Industries Development Assistance and Services (MIDAS), handed over the awards -- a crest and a cheque of Tk 2 lakh -- to each of the awardees.

Addressing the ceremony as chief guest, Inu thanked The Daily Star

and IPDC Finance Ltd for the initiative to find out and recognise the women who have been working silently, braving all odds, to establish social justice and empower women.

Those who play an important role in building the nation should be recognised to inspire others to follow their path, he said.

“The nation that does not recognise heroes cannot create new heroes,” Inu said and added that he would “advise the state to organise such award ceremonies as well.”

He said women still today face a lot of harassments and discrimination at their workplaces and even in families. Despite that, women were making significant contributions to the society, he added.

Inu said there were inherent practices of discriminating women over property-related issues and suggested that such discriminations should end.

“We won't be able to achieve sustainable development goals unless we eliminate gender inequality.”

Mominul Islam, managing director and CEO, IPDC Finance Limited, said, “Many are working tirelessly for the development of this country. Of them, however, women's contribution is more than the men's because they have to overcome many hurdles.”

He said he was humbled by the greatness of the awardees and added

that the recognition would boost their confidence to do even better.

MIDAS Chairperson Parveen Mahmud said those who work in silence, behind the scene, should get more recognition.

The Daily Star Editor and Publisher Mahfuz Anam said the idea behind the award was to recognise the women who are silently serving their communities at the grassroots but remain unnoticed.

“Their examples in serving the community and helping fellow human beings make them superior to many of us. I hope this recognition inspires others to serve humanity in the same way,” he said.

Anam said the basic human qualities that everybody has in them should not wither in the busy urban life.

On receiving her award, Irani Baroi said she worked for the people, not for any reward. “I never had imagined such recognition. I am so happy...I cannot express my feelings in words.”

Shahida Akhter Shorna said she started to work for women empowerment after noticing discrimination between men and women in her childhood.

“I want all women to be educated and protest any discrimination,” she told this correspondent.

Bhagya Rani Banik said she had been committed to agricultural

research, and that the award would inspire others to work more for the public interest. She also thanked the government for its women-friendly policies in various sectors.

Fatema Begum said women's contributions to the society largely remained ignored and the initiative to award the seven women would pave the way for others to do something good for the society.

Rokeya Begum said the award meant a lot of inspiration for her to go forward with her goal to promote female education.

Maftahul Jannat Likhon said she was feeling encouraged to work more for the poor children who are deprived of education. “I studied up to class six. I don't want others to be like me. I want them to have education and earn dignity,” she said.

Rokia Afzal Rahman, chairperson of Mediaworld Limited; Geeti Ara Safia Choudhury, adviser to a former caretaker government; Shaheen Anam, executive director of Manusher Jonno Foundation; Inspector General of Police AKM Shahidul Hoque; magician Jewel Aich and representatives from several foreign missions in Dhaka, among others, were present at the ceremony.

The programme, moderated by singer and journalist Elita Karim, also featured short screening of documentaries on each of the awardees and a cultural show.

Dissenting voices being stifled

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Also launched through a press conference at the National Press Club, New Delhi, the report said only a single case has resulted in convictions in four years.

“Since the Awami League government was re-elected in 2014, only one case resulted in convictions -- eight alleged members of Ansar al-Islam were found guilty in December 2015 for their role in an attack.”

The report said some activists have received death threats, forcing some of them to leave the country for their own safety, while the authorities have refused to offer them protection.

Over the last year, the Bangladeshi government has also intensified its crackdown on public debate and criticism, harassing media workers, interfering with their work, and bringing criminal charges against them under draconian laws, it read.

REGIONAL NATURE OF THREATS
Asked why Amnesty chose New Delhi instead of Dhaka to hold the press conference, its Bangladesh researcher Olof Blomqvist wrote to The Daily Star through e-mail, “We decided to launch this report in Delhi with the help of Amnesty International India because we wanted to highlight the regional nature of threats to freedom of expression.”

“We have documented many of the same issues and restrictions on countries like India, Pakistan and Maldives. We have also organised a press conference in London for the Bangladesh correspondents based

there.”

About the report, Olof Blomqvist said, “Between the violence of armed groups and state repression of the state, secular voices in Bangladesh are being consistently silenced. Not only is the government failing to protect people's freedom of expression, it has been blaming them for the threats they face and criminalising the work of bloggers and journalists through a slew of repressive laws.”

The researcher added, “The crackdown on dissent and secular thought in Bangladesh must end. The very first steps must include providing protection to those who are threatened for raising their voices, and to repeal or reform the draconian laws that are used to punish anyone voicing inconvenient opinions.”

BLAMING THE VICTIMS
Mentioning the killing of online activist Nazimuddin Samad in April 2016, the report said the government sought to blame the tragedy on him.

It also mentioned that Home Minister Asaduzzaman Khan Kamal said the police would scrutinise Samad's writings for “objectionable” content.

“In several other cases, activists told Amnesty International the police refused to register their complaints about threats they received. In other instances, the police suggested the victims should leave the country, or even began harassing them for writing on ‘secular topics.’”

One secular blogger, who received more than a dozen death threats by phone and on social media, told the London-based organisation: “I

made several attempts to get some help, but [to] my face they refused to help me.”

Speaking to Amnesty, journalists described the repression as the worst they've endured since Bangladesh returned to civilian rule in 1991. There are now “red lines” that journalists are careful not to cross. Few dare publish reports that may be deemed critical of Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina.

“This has brought a climate of fear in Bangladesh's once-vibrant civil society, who now resorts to self-censorship.”

'DRACONIAN LAW'
The report said the 2006 Information and Communications Technology (ICT) Act, which carries a minimum sentence of seven years, is seen as the principal instrument to muzzle critical voices in the country.

Its vaguely worded clauses empower the authorities to prosecute people “in the interest of sovereignty, integrity or security of Bangladesh” or if they are deemed to “prejudice the image of the State” or “hurt religious belief”, it read.

The report said the government has used the “draconian law” to silence criticism in the media by bringing criminal charges against journalists for simply doing their work.

“In December 2016, Nazmul Huda, a print and television journalist, was arrested, viciously beaten in custody and then charged under the ICT Act for covering protests by garment workers outside Dhaka.”

The report said in 2013, the government also used the ICT Act to

bring criminal charges against four secular bloggers for allegedly “hurting religious sentiments”.

“Since 2013, several high-profile journalists and editors have been subjected to politically-motivated criminal charges. Most of them have been associated with media outlets that are critical of the government or supportive of the political opposition.”

The report said that one journalist told Amnesty International: “The government has picked a few individuals to make examples out of. This has been to instil fear in other media, to show what happens when you cross the line.”

In one instance, Awami League supporters filed a flurry of 83 politically motivated cases against Mahfuz Anam, editor and publisher of The Daily Star, it mentioned.

It also said Shafiq Rehman, an elderly opposition supporter and the editor of the weekly Mouchake Dhil magazine, was held in solitary confinement for over three weeks on a trumped-up charge of “conspiring to abduct and assassinate” ruling party politician Sajeeb Wazed Joy.

“Bangladesh's authorities have frequently invoked archaic, colonial-era criminal defamation and seditious laws against critical journalists.”

It said the authorities are also now proposing new laws, such as a Digital Security Act and Liberation War Denial Crimes Act. If enacted, these laws would impose further restrictions on freedom of expression by creating new criminal offences, sometimes using national security as a cover.