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Politics and public life

Whenever political parties celebrate their occasions or carry out their programmes and rallies, city dwellers have to pay heavy price. Traffic gridlocks paralyse the entire city. Billions of takas worth of working hours goes into total wastage. People who have emergency needs such as patients heading for hospitals, examinees and workers on emergency duties have to go through living nightmares. Unfortunately, we have taken these sufferings for granted. Nobody dares to protest when ruling political parties occupy the city centres to arrange their rallies blocking all the important streets. Ironically, the law enforcing agencies also collaborate with the party workers and advise the citizens to avoid those streets. Due to our indifference towards our own sufferings, political programmes involving street-blockades have become a common practice in Bangladesh. Any aggrieved group, whether political or non-political, which wants public and government attention blocks streets nowadays without any care for public sufferings. Ganajagoron Mancha blocked Shahbagh avenue, one of the main intersections of Dhaka's streets, for several months. Students of Eden College and Dhaka College blocked Nilkhet intersection for several days creating havoc in several major avenues. The situation worsens when the over-enthusiastic party workers force all the city dwellers to listen to their hocus pocus by installing loud speakers all over the city without any regard for hospitals, educational institutions or religious buildings. Such disregard for time and public sufferings cannot be allowed in a nation of civilised people.
Rafid Alam
Mohammadpur, Dhaka



PHOTO: UMMID ASHRAF

“Sometimes I think it is a great mistake to have matter that can think and feel. It complains so. By the same token, though, I suppose that boulders and mountains and moons could be accused of being a little too phlegmatic.”
— Kurt Vonnegut Jr

SNAPSHOT



PHOTO: COURTESY

Are women not revolutionaries?

This is a very valid question asked by *Star Weekend* in its article published on November 17, 2017. Although Bangladesh's two main political parties are led by women, male dominance in the political arena is quite prominent. Female politicians are often considered as weaker counterparts as they participate in the parliament mostly through reserved seats. Even in the global scale, women's representation as political heroes is extremely rare. In the article published in *Star Weekend*, two photographs of celebrating hundred years anniversary of the great October revolution was published. The two photographs showed the left wing political parties celebrated the day with photographs of Karl Marx, Vladimir Y Lenin and Mao Zedong. However, nobody paid any tribute to the contributions of the leaders of Communist Women's International.

Contribution of the female communist leaders such as Inessa Armand, Clara Zetkin have largely been forgotten. How can we call these parties as progressive ones when they too practice male chauvinism in their political structure? On the other hand, we also do not pay proper respect to our national heroines. For many years we did not pay tribute to biranganas as they would be ostracised from their own societies had they got recognised as victim women. The fact is our education system, our society teaches us to think of women just as and chaste, obedient housewives. It is really unfortunate that we cannot think of them in a leading or commanding role, such as soldiers or the leaders of a revolution.
Shumon Paul
Narinda, Dhaka

HUMAN RIGHTS

“I was so happy when I saw the madam of the house, I told her I'd do whatever she asked of me,” described Moyna. “She took me to a room and asked me if I wanted to shower after my long flight from Bangladesh.” Moyna said yes. “After that she gave me a dress to wear that was very flimsy and revealing and asked me to put it on,” Moyna shared. “I said I can't wear this.” That is when the mistress of the house started to beat her up. A crying, scared Moyna put on the outfit provided to her. The matronly-looking woman is a mother of two and had gone to the Middle East to support her children. “A young man entered the room, and wrapped his arms around me,” continued the woman, breaking down into sobs as she told the story. “An older man, the master of the house followed.” Physically, mentally and emotionally, drained, Moyna steadily got sicker and sicker until her sponsors “sold” her to Dubai where she ended up in a hospital. She used to continuously pass blood as a result of the sexual abuse and still continues to do so. She was in the Middle East for 11 months before managing a flight back home.

Moyna was one of the many women speaking about their experiences of abuse in the Middle East, in front of a full audience at the Muktijuddho Jadughar premises last week. Almost all the women had gone there to provide domestic services. They were speaking at a Public Hearing arranged by One Billion Rising.

“The master of the house and his son used to come into my room and abuse me,” described Yasmin who had gone to Jordan for a job at a garments factory, but was cheated into entering domestic service. “The dalal's name is Altaf, punish him! Punish him!” Yasmin screamed at the audience before collapsing into a fit of sobs on the podium.

According to the existing laws, none of these women who had, on many occasions, been treated as modern-day sex slaves can ever get justice for the terrifying ordeal they faced. They are now back in Bangladesh, battered and bruised, working menial jobs for peanuts.

“The first barrier that a domestic worker who is being raped will face is in reporting the event,” stated Shakirul Islam, the chairman of Ovivashi Kormi Unnayan Programme. They were one of the organisations who worked closely with the survivors speaking at the event. “The migrant workers going from



ILLUSTRATION: KAZI TAHSIN AGAZ APURBO

“PUNISH HIM, PUNISH HIM!”
No justice for abused women migrant workers

ZYMA ISLAM

Bangladesh are rarely allowed to have cell phones. They depend on their employers to make calls. So how will they call the police?” he added. “If they try to get out of the house and go to the police station, they need the permission of their employers. The minute they step out of the house without their consent, they become undocumented,” continued Shakirul. “The employers can then file a lawsuit against the workers for running away.” That is precisely what happened to Yasmin. Unable to take the abuse anymore, she ran away from home one day, under the pretext of leaving the

house to take out the trash. After walking for a while, she was picked up by the police and thrown into prison for three months.

This happened because domestic workers are brought to the Middle East through the “kafala” system, under which their employers pay a heavy sum of money to be provided with a labourer. Only the employer can let the worker go—there is no other way out.

“I was bought” was the most common line spoken by the women on stage that day.

The only way that rape victims can get help is so idealistic that Shakirul has never seen it happen in his years working for migrant worker rights. “Bangladeshi embassies in the Middle East have legal wings that are supposed to help victims,” he stated. Acknowledging the fact that

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PHOTO: SIBYLLE HOFER-AGENTUR SCHWIMMER



THE COLOSSUS RISES OUT OF THE MIGHTY PADMA



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