

## A continuous struggle

Let's work together for gender equality

WE have come a long way since 1909, more than a century ago, when the first Women's Day was observed in the United States, and since 1917, when women gained suffrage in Soviet Russia, and March 8 became a national holiday there. The International Women's Day (IWD) was first celebrated 43 years ago today, in 1975. Quite some time has passed since these milestones in the long struggle for women's rights were achieved. Where do we stand today?

Despite the leaps and bounds we have made in gender equality, there is a lot of work to be done. Violence against girls and women is rampant. Wage gap is far from being closed. Women's unpaid work is yet to be recognised.

In Bangladesh, where girls are forging ahead in the realms of education, law enforcement, civil service, etc., how do we reconcile with the fact that the rate of child marriage in the country is the fourth highest in the world? Or that a large percentage of women in the informal sector lack legal and social protection? How should we come to terms with the fact that women's safety in the public space is not guaranteed? According to a recent Brac study, 94 percent of women surveyed said that they experienced harassment in public transport.

This is just the tip of the iceberg. At the root of it all lie deeply entrenched social norms and patriarchal attitudes. They cannot be eradicated in a matter of years, or even decades. But we have got to start somewhere—activism at the grassroots level and political leadership must lead the way. As we observe IWD at a time when movements like #MeToo have lent momentum to gender parity on a global level, it is time we realised that the road to equality is a universal one. We are all in it together.

## What will the world do about Rohingyas?

Action needed to stop ethnic cleansing

WE commend the statement issued by the UN Assistant Secretary-General for Human Rights in recognising that Rohingyas continue to be victims of ethnic cleansing and forced starvation and that the Myanmar government says one thing to the international community and does something diametrically opposite to the Rohingya community. Bangladesh is now hosting practically the entire Rohingya populace on its soil and going by the steps taken by the Myanmar government that has deployed its army along our border, it would seem that the deployment has only two purposes. First, it seems to be a pre-emptive measure to stop the Rohingya repatriation back to Myanmar along what has been agreed upon bilaterally between Bangladesh and Myanmar. And second, more ominously, it could very well be that the remaining Rohingyas could eventually be pushed out of that country and into Bangladesh.

The world talks and condemns the atrocities taking place in Myanmar. Despite irrefutable aerial footage of Rohingya villages being pillaged and destroyed, all we are left with are statements of condemnation. That will not have any effect on a government that can stoop to ethnic cleansing. While Myanmar shows the thumb at the UN by refusing to let in neutral observers to see for themselves what has happened in the state of Rakhine, how long will it be before the world's inaction convinces the Myanmar government that it faces no serious threat in terms of punitive sanctions? Is that the message the world community is giving to Myanmar? That it will stand by while the wholesale suppression of a people is allowed to be perpetrated?

## LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

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### Leadership in business

When it comes to success in business, most people think of business strategy. And yes, strategy is indeed an important aspect of it. However, leadership skill is what makes the real difference at the end of the day.

Good leadership in business is all about mentoring, guiding, coaching and leading work teams. Good leaders give people the opportunity to develop, innovate and contribute in their own unique ways for the overall success of their organisation. Our young people should be prepared to take up such leadership positions and should work towards acquiring the skills that are needed to become good leaders. They are the future of our country, so they should be taught the attributes of a good leader at an early age.

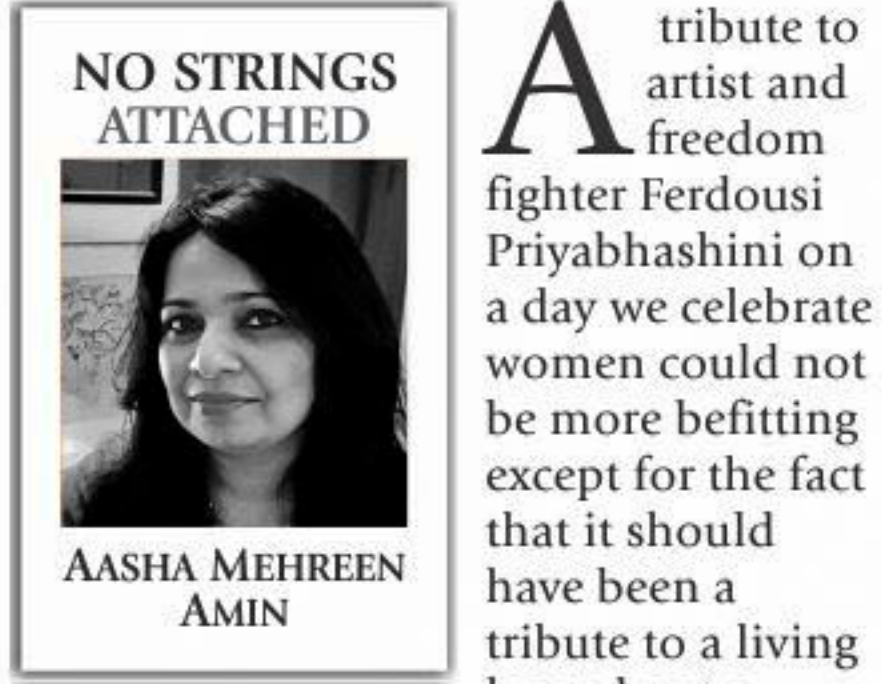
Mahamudul Islam, East West University

### Eradicating mosquitos

The BBC Bangla's morning programme recently dedicated a long segment on the widespread problem of mosquitos in Dhaka. The programme included an interview of the Chief Health Officer of DNCC, who said that the authority opened a hotline for people to report the spread of mosquitos in their respective areas. This is a commendable step.

However, the authorities should do more to eradicate mosquitos in the city to avoid another potential Dengue or Chikungunya epidemic. As a resident of Gulshan-1, which is surrounded by a lake, I draw the attention of the DNCC to the prevalence of mosquitos in my neighbourhood. The authorities should immediately seek to address this issue.

Zahedur Rahman, Gulshan



**NO STRINGS ATTACHED**  
AASHA MEHREEN AMIN

tribute to artist and freedom fighter Ferdousi Priyabhashini on a day we celebrate women could not be more befitting except for the fact that it should have been a tribute to a living legend not a eulogy for a hero who is no more. She passed away on March 6. When one looks at the life of this incredibly brave and beautiful woman one cannot help but feel that we as a nation have failed miserably to pay our dues to this freedom fighter. Yes she was finally recognised for her sacrifices and incredible heroism, but it was 44 years after independence, in 2016. Why did it take us so long to acknowledge a sacrifice so great?

It is a question that no one has an answer to, yet hints at the cruel prejudices of society towards Birangonas of '71—prejudices that allowed war heroines to be ostracised, treated with utter neglect and contempt, giving them no solace, forget gratitude, for the hellish price they paid for our freedom. Priyabhashini, a survivor of sexual violence throughout the nine months of war, decided to become the voice of the Birangonas by taking the brave step of telling her story to her nation. Unfortunately such courage was not very well received, especially in the early years. Her family rejected her and her marriage (first) broke up.

Yet nothing, not the rejection of her relatives, the contemptuous looks of

*Nothing, not the rejection of her relatives, the contemptuous looks of strangers or even the general apathy towards her status as a war heroine, could daunt her zest for life.*

ALISON BLAKE and JIM MCALPINE

AS we reflect on International Women's Day and on the extraordinary and empowered women in our lives—leaders in politics, business, education, civil society, in entertainment and in our homes—we must also address the barriers other women face across the world.

Globally, one in three women will experience violence in their lifetime. Violence against women and girls remains one of the most widespread human rights violations. Violence and threats of violence appear in many forms—domestic violence, sexual violence, sexual harassment, female



genital mutilation, and child, early and forced marriage.

The consequences for girls and women who experience violence are huge. Survivors suffer life-long physical and mental health problems. Violence against women and girls also has a serious economic impact.

There has been significant progress in getting as many girls as boys enrolled in



Priyabhashini at work.

strangers or even the general apathy towards her status as a war heroine, could daunt her zest for life. She continued to speak out for other Birangonas, changing the narrative of the shamed, helpless victim of wartime rape to a phoenix-like figure that survived the most horrific trauma a woman could go through and emerged stronger than ever. Over the decades she has not only inspired other war heroines but thousands of other women and men in the motherland she so fiercely loved.

Says writer and activist Shabnam Nadiya in a heartfelt Facebook post: "...by openly proclaiming herself a survivor of wartime rape, made me and

countless young girls like me, examine and understand war, womanhood, honour, courage and strength. And she showed us that the shame of violation did not belong to the victim, never to the victim."

Remarkably, instead of bitterness all that this larger-than-life personality exuded was boundless love for anyone who had the privilege of coming into contact with her. Unsurprisingly, many of her younger fans call her mother and mourn her passing with the grief of adoring children. And it was for this love for humanity, for nature and her country that she immersed herself into art, becoming a sculptor and creating

the most enchanting pieces of artwork that this nation has seen. She has used iron, wood and other natural raw material to express her artistic self. Appreciating life's simple moments seem to have been recurring themes. *Godhuli logno* (twilight), a piece in driftwood, depicts a group of labourers going home, carrying firewood for the evening's cooking. It shows that serene, hopeful moment when the sun and the labourer end the day to rest until the next dawn. *Shomudr abashon* (a home by the sea) shows a solitary hut that gives refuge from a turbulent world outside. *Shoronarhi* heartbreakingly imbibes the tragedy of exodus of refugees—a reference to the Liberation War. Trees have always triggered her fascination and imagination. Often she would find a piece of wood or root of a tree and turn it into a piece of art according to how she perceived it—as an abandoned house, two figures embracing or an old temple in the forest.

Priyabhashini was born in Khulna on February 19, 1947. Interestingly she got her first lessons in art at age 10, from SM Sultan in Kushtia where her father worked as a teacher in a college and it was this maestro who, many years later when they met, convinced her that her art should be shared with the world.

Her own home, in recent years, in Bashundhara, she turned into an artistic idyllic sanctuary surrounded by trees. She lived with her loving husband Ahsan Ullah whom she married in 1972 and who became blind due to an illness but saw the world through the eyes of his doting life partner—Priyabhashini—the one whose speech is endearing and sweet. She had six children but had to endure the loss of one of her daughters.

In later years various ailments caught up with her and eventually forced her into hospitalisation. One cannot help but wonder whether as a nation we could have done something more to have made her life easier, her health better.

Such regrets will always haunt our collective psyche for we are only human and it is inevitable that the voice of conscience will make its brutal point. For now let us remember and celebrate the beauty of this woman—her ability to transcend the trauma of her past and see what is beguiling in life, in nature, in relationships and in the inexplicable love for one's motherland.

Aasha Mehreen Amin is Deputy Editor, Editorial and Opinion, The Daily Star.

# Putting women and girls at the heart of our work

primary school and reducing maternal and infant mortality in Bangladesh, and women have more opportunities for formal employment. But women and girls continue to be disempowered and experience high levels of violence. Over 80 percent of married Bangladeshi women are abused at least once during their marriage, be it physical, sexual, emotional or financial abuse and most often from someone they know and should be able to trust.

And the marriage of young girls remains a problem. Although the proportion of girls marrying in their teens has been declining for 10 years or so, Bangladesh still has one of the

supporting women's and girls' education, health and economic empowerment, so that girls and women can achieve their full potential. We also support the victims of violence by ensuring they can access security, justice and health services. Our programmes create job opportunities for survivors, helping them to be reintroduced to society. We also work with men and boys to help tackle the social and cultural attitudes and norms that do not condemn all gender-based violence and early marriage.

Since 2015, UK aid has ensured access to security and justice services for more than six million women and

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recently, we have allocated an additional one million pounds to UNFPA in Bangladesh to ensure that protection is incorporated into the UN response to help address shockingly high levels of sexual and gender-based violence experienced by Rohingya women and girls who have taken shelter in Bangladesh.

Gender parity won't happen overnight. But across the world women are making positive gains day by day. Plus, there's indeed a very strong and growing global movement of advocacy, activism and support. The campaign has dominated conversations at the Golden Globes, Baftas and Oscars award ceremonies demonstrating the prevalence of violence against women and girls. The #MeToo campaign has helped give many women a voice who had not felt empowered or safe enough to speak out before. Now, more than ever, there's a strong call-to-action to promote gender parity, to motivate friends, colleagues and whole communities to think, act and challenge ourselves to be gender inclusive.

We all—men and women, boys and girls—need to #PressforProgress. To do something for the one in three women and girls around the world who experience violence in their lifetime. By working together to tackle the root causes and by putting women and girls at the heart of our work, by empowering them in the home, in schools, in the workplace and in the public spaces, we can change the world.

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