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She brought up three sons who, like their father, are solvent farmers. However, despite their solvency, when it came to sharing property, they refused to make any compromise. Through a village arbitration, they forced their mother to accept that the household property of around seven *kathas* would be equally divided among the three brothers. They promised her that they would take care of her living afterwards.

Once the property was shared, the three brothers started quarrelling with each other so bitterly over their mother's living expenditure that poor Bilkis had to seek shelter in her ancestral home. She says, "Every day I used to be teased by my daughters-in-law as nobody was happy with my presence. They forbade my grandchildren to come to me. My life became intolerable there. One day my brother came to see me and realising my condition offered shelter for me in a corner of his house."

Bilkis was not welcomed warmly in her ancestral home either. She is living in a one-room thatched hut in a corner of her brother's farmhouse. Her brother has given her a space to live, but she also has to do household chores and take part in backbreaking agricultural works, such as rice-husking and drying paddy at this age.

Bilkis did not know that she was entitled to a share of her husband's property. Neither did she have any idea that she also had a share in her father's property which her brothers and their families have been enjoying since their father's death. Ultimately, she has accepted her fate and is grateful to her brother for offering shelter in the household, of which, she is also a rightful owner.

Of course, it's not as if family members would have happily given her due assets had she known about her share and demanded it. After claiming her family property from her brothers, Rabeya Khatun's life became so jeopardised by her own family members that she had to leave her village in Singair upazila of Manikganj district. She is now living at a slum in Rayerbazar and working as a maid-servant.

Rabeya Khatun had seven other siblings, four brothers and two sisters. Two of her sisters were married off in far away villages, who now have little contact with their families in Gobindal village of Singair. However, Rabeya was married in the same village and was later abandoned by her husband. With two children, Rabeya was leading an impoverished life with some financial assistance from her father. After his death, Rabeya requested her brothers to hand over her share of inheritance for the sake of her children's sustenance. "My brothers refused and told me that my share was already paid during my marriage as dowry. Most of my father's property are located on the roadside. As far I know, I was supposed to get at least five decimals from my father's property which was enough to set up a shop or a small rentable house. At least I would get Tk 20-25 lakh by selling the property." Refused by her brothers, Rabeya visited the local land office who told her to obtain an inheritance certificate from the court and file a petition to the assistant commissioner (land). Overcoming a lot of

difficulties, Rabeya managed to get the certificate after 15 days.

With the certificate, Rabeya visited the upazila land office and got a date of hearing when her brothers and old mother were also summoned. However, at the hearing, the brothers produced deeds which showed their father had distributed the property among his sons during his lifetime, violating the Islamic inheritance jurisprudence. Even her mother, who has to now live with her sons, agreed that Rabeya's father had cleared her share of the inheritance by paying her dowry (another unislamic custom). Realising the situation, the then assistant commissioner advised Rabeya to file a case before the civil court.

By that time, Rabeya's brothers had had enough. When they learned that Rabeya might file a case seeking possession of her due property, they took revenge against Rabeya. According to Rabeya, they vandalised her house and tried to kidnap her elder son. She says, "One day, after returning home, I found that my one room apartment was ransacked and with my little ornaments, my inheritance certificate was also lost. After a week, my elder son survived a kidnap attempt as

Patriarchal customs compel many women to accept that their male family members are the only ones entitled to their ancestral property. Again, very few even know about their rights over their ancestral property.

some of his classmates shouted and some garment workers gathered at the spot hearing their rescue call. After my son's traumatic experience, I lost any hope of recovering my land. Upon advice from some of my neighbours, I decided to leave my village and come to Dhaka for work."

There are many women like Rabeya whose inheritance rights were refused due to patriarchal customs. In many parts of Bangladesh, even in urban areas, it is considered dishonourable for women to claim inherited property. For instance, Shamsheer Alam (not his real name) is a high-ranking government official. He advised his wife to withdraw her claim from her inheritance. He says, "In my locality (Madaripur district), women who have to take property from her father's family are not well-respected. Her husband is often rebuked for 'making money by selling wife'. Also, the families in our locality cannot accept that their ancestral property will be distributed to another family. Considering all these, I advised my wife not to make any trouble with that property."

As land prices are increasing due to urbanisation and industrialisation, women are increasingly becoming aware of what they are losing. According to Md Mominur Rashid, zonal settlement officer, Directorate of Land Records and Survey (DLRS), Dhaka says, "During land surveys, we are now getting increasing number of appeals and complaints from women who are trying to claim their property rights. However, there is no doubt that the percentage is still very low. If we take a *mouja* randomly and see how much lands are owned by women, I am sure we shall not find more than 10-20 percent."

Nevertheless, an extremely complex and outdated land administration system is a major deterrent for women who want to claim their property rights.

The Bangladesh government registers information about land and its owners through countrywide land surveys. At present, Revisional Survey-2 (popularly known as BRS) is being carried out in different parts of Bangladesh, which was started in 1985-86. According to the current survey method, a team of surveyors visit an area and collect information about lands and its owners. Next, the owners of the land visit the surveyors' camp with necessary papers to collect certified copy of land-ownership (*math porcha*). The owners then visit the settlement office with necessary documents to attest the land-ownership certificate. Finally, the settlement office publishes the description of the land and name of their owners for public information.

The process requires that the owners of the property or their representatives to be present during the survey and submit documents such as inheritance deeds and certificates to establish their ownership. However, female heirs, particularly impoverished ones in the rural areas, who get married in other villages or work in urban areas, cannot always be present to establish their claims. They can also expect little help from their relatives, many of whom try to deprive them of their rights. According to Mominur Rashid, "Many families, influenced by their patriarchal customs prepared deeds of inheritance to ensure that most of their land assets will go to the male heirs. In these cases, we advise these female heirs to go to the court if they are aggrieved with the deeds."

However, if someone files a land related case before the court, there is no guarantee that s/he will get the verdict in her/his lifetime. According to media reports, over 3.4 million cases are pending with the country's high and lower courts and among them 1.3 million are property-related cases. There are thousands of cases which have not been solved in 10, 20 or even in 50 years. Like land related cases, land surveys take a long time to complete which also make them vulnerable to corruption.

For instance, RS started in different *moujas* of Narsingdi in 2008 and finally it's going to be complete in 2019, as claimed by the DLRS. During this long period, if a person can produce deeds like Rabeya's brothers and claim their ownership, settlement officers can do little for the female heirs. There are numerous allegations of corruption against land officials such as surveyors,

land registrars and settlement officers. In fact, the minister for land, Saifuzzaman Chowdhury, even admitted as such in a conference and said, "Land offices are the hub of corruption. 'A thief would not listen to the scripture'-- this proverb perfectly goes with the employees of the land offices (*Prothom Alo*, June 16, 2015)."

Maksudur Rahman Patwary, secretary in charge at the Ministry of Land, claims that corruption has significantly reduced in the land offices. He says, "We are closely monitoring activities of land offices; Anti-Corruption Commission is also working with us." He blames the lack of coordination between two ministries for procrastination in activities related to land administration. According to Patwary, the land ministry is responsible for land surveys, records, collection of tax and maintenance of ownership. The Ministry of Law, Justice and Parliamentary Affairs conducts the land-registration process.

According to Patwary, "Due to lack of coordination between these two ministries, it takes time to complete the registration process as the land owners has to visit the land registration office and assistant commissioner's (land) office several times. Last month I sent letters to the law ministry seeking their cooperation to ensure coordination between the two ministries. I also proposed to bring the registration process under the ministry of land but the law ministry refused."

When asked what the land ministry can do to ensure that female heirs and land owners will not be deprived of their rights during surveys and settlements, the secretary says, "Today I will attend a meeting which has been called just to discuss the issue that you mentioned. We have already digitised a huge amount of land related data. The digitisation process is ongoing. Digitisation will make the process more transparent. However, raising awareness is critical in this regard. In this meeting, we shall talk about how we can raise awareness among men and women about female property rights."

Maolana Mokhtar Ahmad, an Islamic scholar, also emphasises raising awareness about inheritance rights of women. He says, "It is really unfortunate that Islamic scholars in Bangladesh rarely speak about women's right of inheritance. We should encourage Islamic scholars and imams to deliver speeches about the importance of female inheritance during Friday sermons. Distributing inherited assets, be it land, cash or any form of possession, according to the Quran, is an obligatory duty for every Muslim. There is no option of compromise or paying it through other ways like dowry which is completely non-Islamic."

However, although almost 90 percent of Bangladeshis claim to be Muslims, age-old patriarchal customs vastly supersedes religious rules when it comes to the distribution of inherited worldly assets. These patriarchal customs, reinforced by weak and corrupt administration, have so deeply been ingrained in our society that many Bangladeshi women like Bilkis, Rabeya or Mrs Shamsheer, simply have to accept their fate of sacrificing their rights of inheritance.

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