

An equal world is an enabled world

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Then there are so many laws installed, but where is the implementation? Why are we so slow in putting into operation what we have made official? For example, there has already been a mandate to establish a sexual harassment committee at every institution, but how many have actually complied with the establishment?

My point is, since we have already moved five steps forward – it is about time we take five more steps.

LS: An equal world is an enabled world — What does it mean to you?

HH: For one, I have certainly not seen an equal world as of yet. In my own life, I have had to face small cases of discrimination during my childhood, even though I came from a very progressive family. And while working for Ain O Salish Kendra, I met so many women, especially from the slums, who face scrutiny on a daily basis. They don't even know who or where to turn to!

But things have slightly improved today, with the advent of numerous women organizations and BLAST (Bangladesh Legal Aid and Services Trust), women can now share their experiences, and get help.

LS: How can the media help?

HH: Cover more about these subjects — voice your opinions and continue to see the ends to a pressing topic. Find out who the perpetrators are, and why they are carrying out harmful activities. Assess

the psychology; try to change the archaic culture that leads to filth and mental degradation.

LS: Today women are included in the board-rooms; they are becoming top level executives and CEOs. Does this signify as progress to you?

HH: Gender equal boardrooms represent a certain class. To assess real progress, we must find out the representation of women workers in the trade unions. What say do they have in these associations? A board-room representative is just one person, while grass roots level employees are many. Therefore, a true representation of progress is indicated by the advancement of the latter.

LS: Collective Individualism, a catchphrase of the 2020 IWD celebrations. What does it signify?

HH: I will be a little sceptical here. Of

course, the fact is when people work together, they go forward in leaps and bounds. In our country's perspective, we see that the men come together to promote an agenda. But the same is not true for women. There's also collective effort from people of the same class, but almost none between the classes. So, this definitely has to go a long way before a true representation takes place.

LS: As a forthright human rights activist who has been vocal for such a long period of time, what would you say are your major frustrations?

HH: We have certainly come 'forward' in ratifying conventions. But there are so many details that are written in these conventions that need to be implemented. Rights of the constitutions — right to life, right to work. In terms of expressing thoughts, we have certainly been successful, but why the lag in implementation?

Domestic violence is still very high. Where is the solution?

The government cannot even help in these regards because sometimes, it is beyond the scope of laws and regulations and more about the ingrained archaic culture.

LS: Do you have any solutions in mind?

HH: Challenge the system, the culture, and etch out smart ways to deal with difficulties. For example, women face abuse when they ride public transport. But this usually happens when a lady travels alone. So why not travel in groups to prevent harassment. And this is perhaps the case with 'women' garments workers. They move in groups whenever they have to travel.

Then there is a significant role played by the media: encouraging the society at large to take the help of the various human aid organisations in the country, asking the victims to make use of the governmental 'one stop crisis centre' and many other legal aid organisations and hospitals available in the country.

You have to speak more about it and write more about it. You are actually doing that here, aren't you? And I guess that is what progress is all about.

By Mehrin Mubdi Chowdhury

Photo: Hameeda Hossain/Sazzad Ibne Sayed

Model: Dayyan, Rania, Anaya



A financially independent woman is a free woman

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stakeholders who can give concrete input for developing an acceptable methodology for incorporating women's unaccounted contribution in the GDP. This will help with recognition of women's contribution to the economy and society.

Secondly, the government should also put adequate attention to reduction of and redistribution of unpaid work. The government may undertake programmes which can contribute to reduce women's workload within the household. Examples of such initiatives may include increasing access to drinking water and natural gas for cooking, as well as establishing childcare centres, which may in turn reduce the time spent by women on household work.

Stricter legal measures should be introduced by the government to eliminate wage discrimination against women in all sectors, as lower wages compared to men is one of the key reasons behind lower contribution of women in the national economy. NGOs and women's organisations could play an active role towards this.

I strongly believe that a gradual reduction in the time spent on unpaid care activities, traditionally performed by women, can make the society better off.

LS: Pink Tax is something that we are all aware of. And this is existent in every discipline. Women are paying more for

essentially everything they purchase in the name of marketing. Can you elaborate on this from an economic aspect?

FK: Quite often, an extra amount of hidden tax is imposed for women's products. This method of pricing for products used by women is a price discrimination. In my mind, Pink tax is an unfair price hike for products that women use.

In the context of Bangladesh, many products that are used by women, such as cosmetics, beauty products, shampoo and sanitary napkins, and even services such as beauty parlours and salons, are taxed differently than male oriented services. Such tax is discriminatory. They do not follow economic logic. Particularly, products like sanitary napkin is an essential hygiene product and not a luxury item. These are needed by women from all types of economic backgrounds. Any discriminatory measures against women should be demolished. But I feel the issue of Pink Tax is still a less discussed issue in Bangladesh. There is a lack of awareness among the shopkeepers and customers. But the key responsibility lies with the manufacturers, who put a price tag on products, and with the policy makers who formulate regulatory measures.

Interview by Mehrin Mubdi Chowdhury

Photo: Fahmida Khatun

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Dear Women, You are half of the society and you raise the other half.