

FROM CHALLENGED BEGINNINGS TO STANDING TALL

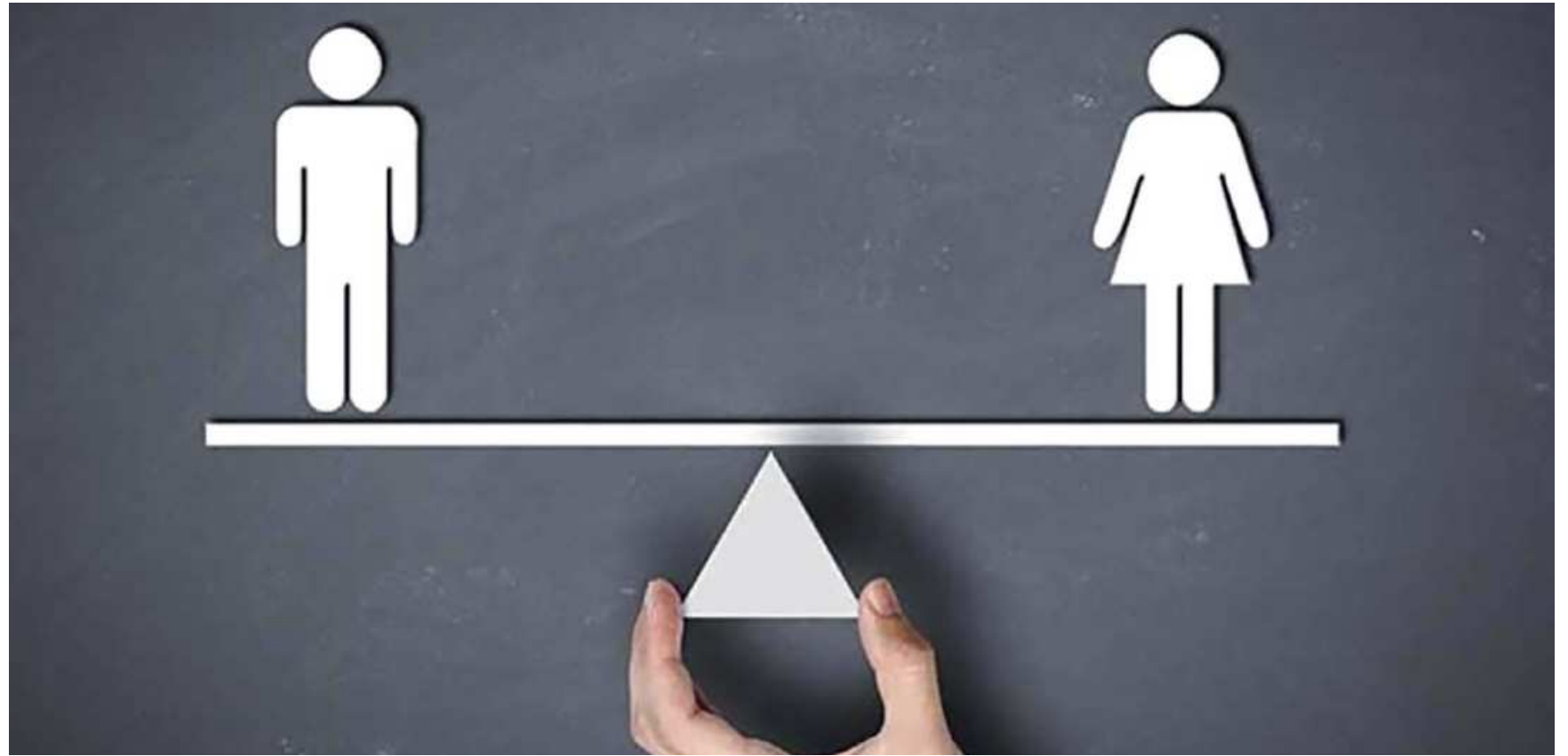
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Creating a safer Bangladesh for women



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Despite enacting several laws in the past decades to protect women and girls from violence, creating a safer space for women and girls is still a distant reality for Bangladesh. A safe space is that which allows every citizen to live, work, commute and access without any fear of being violated. Sadly, for most of the women and girls in Bangladesh, irrespective of urban or rural settings, life both within and outside the home is an everyday challenge. Domestic violence, child marriage, dowry demands, sexual violence and harassment, economic abuse, etc. are all common phenomenon for women living in Bangladesh. We have had a good number of evidence also pointing towards the weak prevention and protection mechanisms that are in place to combat issues of violence against women. We have spoken and heard about those challenges and barriers several times in the past and yet the issues persisted and sometimes had even grown to larger scales, putting women in increased vulnerability in their private and public lives.



Sadly, for most of the women and girls in Bangladesh, irrespective of urban or rural settings, life both within and outside the home is an everyday challenge. Domestic violence, child marriage, dowry demands, sexual violence and harassment, economic abuse, etc. are all common phenomenon for women living in Bangladesh. We have had a good number of evidence also pointing towards the weak prevention and protection mechanisms that are in place to combat issues of violence against women. We have spoken and heard about those challenges and barriers several times in the past and yet the issues persisted.

The issues of discrimination, social degradation and exclusion, lack of empathy, inadequate protection services, lack of access to justice and weak prosecution for offenders, are challenges so deeply rooted in our socio-legal tenets that there is certainly no single short-term solution to address the crisis. But that does not also imply that we are left with no hope to begin the healing process in order to ensure a safer Bangladesh for women.

I believe the critical first step is to collectively accept and acknowledge that violence and discrimination against

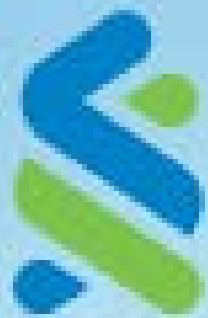
women are real—that they are not some feminist propaganda—that when a woman says she has been victimised it is not because she had asked for it or because she has some ulterior motive against some innocent men. I find this crucial because there is a typical silence and ignorance to some extent surrounding the issues of violence and harassment that women of all ages and backgrounds experience in their lives in our country. From the exterior, there may seem a lot of noises around these issues but when it comes to real actions, issues of violence and harassment

against women perhaps rank at the bottom of the list of priority. The blame for this attitude of discounting the harsh reality, which half of the country's population faces, can be attributed to all of us—both collectively and individually. It only takes brutality of some extreme level that we pay some attention to a particular victim of violence, while still being oblivious of the fact that violence and harassment is a reality for majority of the women—women who are working, commuting or taking care of the household chores.

No doubt, violence against men

also exists and so does violence against gender diverse communities. However, it is beyond any question that in the end, it is the women who are the majority of the victims of varied forms of violence in Bangladesh—the same being true for the rest of the world. As such, when voices are raised to prioritise issues of violence against women, disregarding those voices on the pretext that existing laws are already biased towards women (as opposed to men) is clearly mistaken and damaging. Victim blaming, together with endorsing the perception

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