

INTERNATIONAL WOMEN'S DAY

# Recognising their invaluable role in society



SHAHEEN ANAM

**T**HIS year, the theme of International Women's Day is "Women in Leadership: Achieving an Equal Future for Covid-19 World". As we

celebrate the day, our thoughts are with the millions of people afflicted with the contagion Covid-19, the precious lives lost and livelihoods destroyed. The pandemic demonstrated once again the role women play during crisis situations in taking on extra work burden, caring for the family, persevering against all odds and providing the leadership that sustain families, yet remain unrecognised and undervalued.

In Bangladesh, the struggle for gender equality has been long and arduous. The political, social and economic progress women have achieved in the last 20 years is in stark contrast to the high number of violence and abuse they suffer, both within families and outside. During lockdown, women faced increased domestic violence demonstrating the unequal power relations and their low status within families. Household chores including productive activities are not valued either by society or families and unpaid care work does not count in national statistics. The undervaluation of their work at home is reflected in the now famous poster of Banche Shekha depicting a woman with 12 hands doing multiple tasks yet a statement below says "my wife does not work".

Recognition of unpaid care work is receiving global attention and is specifically mentioned in SDG Goal 5 target 5.4 stating: "Recognise and value unpaid care and domestic work through the provision of public services, infrastructure and social protection policies and the promotion of shared responsibility within the household and the family as nationally appropriate". However, there is not much action at state level for the implementation or attainment of this target.

Recently, in a landmark ruling, a Beijing divorce court ordered a man to compensate his wife for the housework

she did during their marriage. The woman will receive USD 7,000 for five years of unpaid labour plus a monthly alimony. The ruling comes after China's introduction of a new civil code under which a spouse is entitled to seek compensation in a divorce if she has taken extra load of household work, caring for children, elderly, etc. The woman argued that her husband did not share any household or child care responsibility. Although the amount of compensation is being debated, this ruling has created a precedent on the possibility of seeking legal recourse for recognition and compensation for unpaid care work.

The case has generated a huge debate all over the world including Bangladesh. Social media is full of comments on the merits and demerits of the ruling. Those in favour find the compensation amount too little while those not in favour are ridiculing it as another stunt from feminists to force husbands to pay for work which is the duty of every woman. Women are ascribed specific gender roles to which they must conform. Household work, caring for children, the elderly and sick comes within these gender defined roles. Ironically, these are not considered "work" but "duties" which every woman, whether she works outside the home or not, is expected to perform.

According to an OECD survey, Chinese women perform 2.5 times more work than men while women in the OECD countries perform twice more housework than men. In Bangladesh, attempts have been made to determine the valuation of women's unpaid care work and give it formal recognition. One suggestion is to monetise and include it in the national GDP. However, this has been met with resistance due to the System of National Accounts (SNA) which does not allow non-market products to be counted in the GDP. In a study by CPD commissioned by MJE, it was found that time spent by a female person (aged 15 years and above) on household work is about three times higher compared to a male person (aged 15 years and above). On an average, a female person works about 7.7 hours on non-SNA activities compared to a male who works about



The artist of this painting is a 9th grader Anujath Sindhu Vinyala of Trissur, Kerala. He painted this because his father continually introduced his mother as 'she is just a house wife, she doesn't work'. Anujath was surprised because he never saw his mother idle so he painted this to depict his mother's daily routine and showed it to his teacher who sent it to the State Government's office where it got selected as the cover for the 2021 Gender Budget Document.

PHOTO: REUTERS

2.5 hours. Through a replacement calculation (shadow wages) the

estimated value of women's unpaid non-SNA (household) works was

equivalent to 76.8 percent of GDP (of FY2013-14) These figures are 2.5 or 2.9 times higher than the income of women receive from paid services.

Evaluation and recognition of women's unpaid work has to be seen beyond monetary compensation. We often hear comments such as, can mothers love be monetised? Or, "so now women have to be paid for taking care of their children". These arguments ignore the legitimate demand for equality, respect and recognition of women's contribution. There is also a fundamental problem with the definition of the word "work" Unless this definition is changed to include all work, whether paid or not, women's household activities will not get the appreciation and respect it deserves.

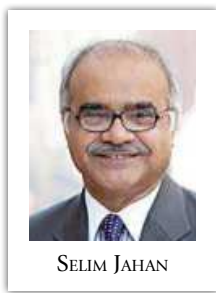
In response to the demand for giving formal recognition to women's unpaid care work, some countries have adopted the Satellite Accounts System. This entails gathering data on all the activities performed by women within households, both productive and reproductive through Time Use Survey, ascribe monetary value to each and show it as a parallel GDP calculation. One can argue as to what will this prove? This will demonstrate concretely in monetary terms the huge contribution women make to the economy, yet which due to the present system of calculation, remains out of national statistics. Such visual demonstration of their contribution will change the attitude towards women which at present is negative and rooted in socio-cultural norms that perpetuate their dependent status. It might result in changing their position within families leading to greater decision-making roles and gender equal relations.

Finally, coming back to the IWD theme of Leadership, Equality in the Covid-19 world. We believe, if ever there was a time to value and recognise the role women play in overcoming crisis and sustaining societies, it is now. With the world economy in ruins, it is the leadership of women along with active collaboration of men, institutions and state that will pull us out of this crisis.

Shaheen Anam is Executive Director of Manusher Jonno Foundation.

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## Women's leadership in a Covid world



SELIM JAHAN

**T**HIS year, the theme of International Women's Day is "Women in Leadership: Achieving an Equal Future for Covid-19 World". When the United Nations chose this theme, the idea was to

celebrate and recognise women's leadership in confronting and tackling the challenges of Covid-19, both inside and outside the household. There is no doubt that such a theme befits the celebration of International Women's Day in the present world.

Women's role in the present day Covid-19 world has proven again that there is no alternative to women's leadership, their capabilities are beyond question, and at various levels, their work and vision have created new frontiers of progress. If we start from the national-level, even though women leaders run governments in only about 20 countries of the world, a number of female heads of governments like the prime ministers of Bangladesh, Denmark, Ethiopia, Finland, Germany, Iceland, New Zealand and Slovakia have provided effective leadership in addressing Covid-19 and rolling-out successful vaccination programmes in their own countries. Their leadership should also be appreciated for their meaningful, compassionate, fact-based public communication. In some of these countries, strong national leadership has also



Senior Nurse Runu Veronica Costa gets the first coronavirus vaccine shot in the country at her workplace in the capital's Kurmitola General Hospital during an event inaugurated virtually by Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina.

PHOTO: COLLECTED

been translated at the local level. In fact, male leadership in many countries couldn't match their female counterparts in other countries.

Secondly, in every country, it is women who constitute many of the frontline workers—hospital administrators, doctors, nurses, health technicians, health workers, cleaners, community workers, etc. Women therefore play a significant leadership role in providing various kinds of services to Covid-infected people and the environment.

Women community workers and volunteers also carried food, medicines and other necessities to people and households who by themselves couldn't do those tasks because of old age, fragile health, disabilities and other reasons. This is a service that those groups of people will never forget.

Women's leading contributions were not only limited to providing essential services, but they also extended to some unusual humane acts. For example, in hospitals,

when people were leaving this world without having their near and dear ones around them, the nurses who held their hands, listened to their last words, comforted them with parting words, were women. It was women who shed the last tears for those who departed.

Thirdly, during the lockdowns, when we were all confined within the four walls of our homes, it was the women who had sustained the families in every sense of the word. They made sure that food was on the table for the family members, that children did their studies, that all household chores were completed, that the old and sick were cared for. Women also ensured that friction and tension within the households were managed, mental health of family members were intact and Covid-19 protocols were maintained. In a nutshell, women took the leading role in sustaining the family and their wellbeing during Covid-19.

Fourthly, in a number of countries, civil society organisations and NGOs, headed by women, played a critical role in highlighting the wellbeing of women during Covid-19. For example, Manusher Jonno Foundation (MJF) last year carried out a survey in 27 out of 64 districts of Bangladesh and reported that 4,249 women and had been subjected to domestic violence in April 2020. Of these, 1,672 women and 424 children were facing domestic violence for the first time in their lives and the violence was blamed on lockdown. Such important research helped create awareness about this issue and for stressing policy advocacy.

Finally, in recent times, a widespread Covid-19 vaccination programme is being

rolled-out throughout the world. Women researchers were a critical part of the teams of scientists that invented various vaccines. Women are also working as frontline workers who are vaccinating millions of people. Thus, the leading role of women in vaccine invention and vaccine roll-out must be heralded.

In conclusion, let me make two points. First, yes, we shall recognise leading roles of women in addressing and tackling Covid-19, but we should not forget that women also suffer more in a Covid-19 world. The impact of the pandemic has been asymmetrical between men and women. Women were the first to lose jobs, they bear multiple burdens of work inside and outside of home, they became the victims of increased domestic violence because of the pandemic. If some within the household were infected with Covid-19, women became the natural caregiver. But when they themselves became the infected party, they had to look around for care.

Second, achieving an equal future for Covid-19 world seems more like rhetoric. The world has already been unequal for men and women. And Covid-19 has exacerbated those inequalities. Reversing that trend would be a herculean task, but it is not impossible. With commitment, conviction and bold strategies at the national and global level, things can be changed. And if we can do that, only then, the theme of 2021 International Women's Day would be a meaningful reality.

Selim Jahan is former Director, Human Development Report Office and the Lead Author, Human Development Report, United Nations Development Programme, New York.

**QUOTABLE Quote**

**MAYA ANGELOU**  
(1928-2014)  
American poet

*You will face many defeats in life, but never let yourself be defeated.*

**CROSSWORD BY THOMAS JOSEPH**

**ACROSS**

- 1 "St. John Passion" composer
- 5 For fear that
- 9 Love affair
- 11 Western, slangily
- 13 Jazz group
- 14 Environmental activist Thunberg
- 15 Raw rock
- 15 New York university
- 18 Normal states
- 20 Perfect rating
- 21 Final finisher
- 22 Like slasher films
- 23 Bill's movie buddy
- 24 Guest bed
- 25 Physicist Niels
- 27 Islands greeting
- 29 Make ajar, in poetry
- 30 Beach in a 1964 song
- 32 Oil company
- 34 Hip-hop music
- 35 Undermine
- 36 Blissful spots
- 38 Bold one
- 39 Barter
- 40 Perch
- 41 Historic periods

**DOWN**

- 1 Strips for breakfast
- 2 Ignoring ethics
- 3 Become visible
- 4 Center
- 5 Theater boxes
- 6 Noble rank
- 7 Song from "How Now, Dow Jones"
- 8 Tie down
- 10 Laughed loudly
- 12 Wet, in a way
- 17 German article
- 19 Addict
- 22 Ruffian
- 24 Dinner wine
- 25 Used a drill
- 26 Met events
- 27 Zoo dweller
- 28 Mystery writer
- 30 Static
- 31 Church areas
- 33 Inking
- 37 Music's Dr. -

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**YESTERDAY'S ANSWERS**

A	M	O	S	C	H	A	P	S
D	I	N	E	D	H	E	R	O
M	A	T	T	E	A	L	A	M
I	M	A	S	H	I	P	P	E
T	I	P	P	E	R	A	L	E
D	O	N	T	T	A	O	S	
R	E	P	S	O	T	S		
A	P	T		D	I	P	P	E
F	L	I	P	P	E	R	A	L
T	O	M	E	I	E	V	I	C
T	E	R	A	S	E	D	O	G
D	E	L	T	S		W	E	D

**BEETLE BAILEY** by Mort Walker

**BABY BLUES** by Kirkman & Scott