Women's movement: The challenge of change

HAMEEDA HOSSAIN

Bangladesh has begun to rate high in official statistics on indicators of women's advancement. In the last 50 years, women have emerged from their invisibility to feature in Bangladesh's development discourse. Official reports acknowledge them as drivers of the economy and as peace keepers. On bill boards we are shown posters of a woman garment worker, or another in uniform, which tell us of women's entry into the market or in frontline service to the state. Their labour has become essential to the family economy.

While these advances can be attributed to positive state policies, it is only one part of the story. For women's changing roles in the economy have yet to make for a comprehensive change in gender relations or promote women's empowerment for several reasons: first, opportunities for education and employment are held back by social and cultural constraints; second, piecemeal reforms and limited participation without equal rights do not bring about real freedom of choice or give women voice; and third, women do not form one monolithic group. Simple reforms do not open doors of advancement equally to all women irrespective of their ethnicity, religion, caste, class or sexual orientation.

National and international investments over the last 50 years have increased women's access to selected services to meet their practical needs partially for education, waged work, and credit. The potential of women's low cost labour has also been seized by the market to boost Bangladesh's rating in global trade. While these advances are important in themselves, we need to ask if they have freed women from the shackles of forced marriages, dowry demands, domestic subservience and marital violence, or exploitation at the work place and sexual harassment in their public lives.

For a wide range of reasons from insecurity to poverty, young girls are unable to complete their schooling, resulting in drop outs. Women's participation in the labour force has increased but their wages remain low and conditions are poor, especially in the informal sector. The export sector recruits a growing number of women, but poor conditions of work, low wages, and risk of industrial accidents call for urgent and effective changes.

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Yes, women have demanded material progress, equality in resource allocation, and development opportunities, but beyond such piecemeal reforms, they expected state interventions to restructure institutional changes which would make for a gender-just transformation in relations within the family, in community values, and in recognition of women as citizens. This is why the demand for legal reform has remained an essential element of the women's movements, as a means towards affecting their public and private lives.

Unequal rights, particularly in marital relations and in inheritance, make for oppressive situations often leading to violence. Thus, notwithstanding women's increased opportunities for education, a customary preference for early marriage has limited women's autonomy. Social insecurity, fear of sexual harassment, and sexual violence are other reasons for young girls to be forced into unwanted marital relationships. Yet the demand for equal rights in marriage and divorce has not progressed beyond the Family Laws Ordinance 1961. After a sustained campaign by women's groups, the government finally adopted a National Policy for Advancement in consultation with many women's groups. It is time to review this and move on in recognition of changing times.

The legacy of traditional religious norms stands in the way of change in personal laws, and underlines the need for reform. A tolerance of unjust customary practices is a contributory cause of gendered violence. Since 2000, several laws have been enacted, including the Domestic Violence Act 2010, which aim to provide protection for the survivor and deterrent penalties to the perpetrator. But patriarchal norms prevent women from seeking justice and the legal system often acts as an impediment. In many cases of rape and sexual violence, defective prosecution and investigation procedures have obstructed justice and increased women's vulnerability. In the case of the rape and death of Shima Choudhury in jail custody, the accused police officers were acquitted on grounds of insufficient evidence, even though there could have been no other conclusion.

Women have challenged the social tolerance of violence instigated by *fatwa*. Nineteen years after the incident of a *fatwa* against Nurjehan in 1993, which led to her death, a directive from the Supreme Court has declared illegal any penalty imposed by a *fatwa*. It now calls for an institutional monitoring (by the National Human Rights Commission) of violations of this order, whether by local representatives, officials, or social elders.

More recently, a younger generation of women have collectively challenged the perpetrators of sexual violence in public institutions by taking it up in the higher courts and campaigning in public. The High Court recommended that educational and other institutions set up Monitoring Committees for deterrent or punitive action in complaints of rape. These interventions await strong enforcement measures by public institutions and active interventions by women and human rights groups.

Women's movements have campaigned for legal and policy reforms as a means towards a change in social or cultural practices. Women had struggled for their representation in parliament or other electoral institutions so that their demands could be discussed at the policy level. Through this they expected to exercise their right to freedom in decision making. Certainly, women's numbers have increased in parliament and in local government, but why do representatives, who have entered this space, sound vociferous in partisan party debates but remain silent on concerns that are central to women's security, such as violence on the campus or the use of militant student cadres?

And is their presence in elected bodies representative of different communities, or do they merely represent a major segment? The divide amongst women on account of their class, religion, ethnicity, or caste suggests that we need to understand how different identities subject women to different forms of exploitation, and how the state and society reinforce these inequalities. When a young Chakma or Marma girl is raped in Khagrachari or Bandarban, in some cases by law enforcement personnel, should we not be equally concerned as we are with the rape of a girl in Tangail?

Women's struggles for equality, for non-discrimination for peace and security, cannot be a means merely to earn privileges for a few or extract concessions from an unjust economic and political order. Should not the exploitation of garment export workers or young domestic workers be taken up by women employers as a woman's issue? Or should it be rejected by them as a class issue? The struggle is to overcome traditional norms of oppression set by a patriarchal society, to curtail the power of political hierarchies and to challenge the exploitation of unregulated market regimes.

A younger generation of feminists have taken up the challenge of citizenship. We need to work together across different spaces: to change the gang culture prevailing in the political space, to speak out as free citizens, and to raise a collective voice against hierarchies of power.

Our struggles should thus envision a recognition of diversity in women's life experiences, and work towards social and economic justice by a meaningful representation in state structures. In challenging the present structures of power, the struggle cannot be deflected with marginal changes without justice.

Hameeda Hossain is Convenor, Sramik Nirapotta Forum.