



VISUAL: STAR

# Why every woman must ask for more



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Every Women's Day, I suffer from this ambivalent feeling of euphoria and despair. I am euphoric about the things we have achieved over the years through relentless efforts of women's/feminist movements, yet dumbfounded by these commodified, spiritless Women's Day celebrations. It is fascinating to see how quickly the neoliberal economy could digest the spirit of collective socialist movements – for fair wages, “bread and peace,” universal suffrage, and reproductive rights – to throw up “empowerment” and individual entitlement, putting the onus on the individual to fight for her/his autonomy. The purple and orange-clad middle-class women at the workplace, in seminars and cafés celebrating one day of “free to be/do whatever” has turned into a full-blown spectacle. And every year, you will find that one naïve male colleague, friend, acquaintance or extended family member who will casually ask, “How much more do you need? All of you are doing so well, look at our indicators, you even have a special day for yourself!”

Now, being a woman in mid-40s, I can either choose to rekindle my young feminist self and give these individuals an earful, or simply disengage. But why let the chance slide if you can deal with it with a little humour and poise? After all, I am a “respectable woman,” who happens to be an academic, is married and has held a family despatch pursuing her hobbies (!), like “activism” and “sports.” Even some of my feminist friends recognise these as some sort of semblance in life, and it is difficult to explain to anyone that all of this is the result of excruciatingly painful negotiations that come with a steep price. Women who are just keeping their nose above the water are thought to be able to do so either because they are born with privileges, or because they have an enabling family (or both) – completely discrediting both the individual and collective struggles of women over generations.

Unfortunately, neither such privileges nor having a “sensible” family translates into equity in life chances, domestic work or the distribution of resources. This circus that we call work-life balance is a neoliberal trap that pivots on appropriating women's labour (either our own or what we can “outsource”), while men can continue their roles as providers and remain uninvolved. What women get in return is zero recognition for domestic work, almost no rights over our children, and not even an equal share of the house/property that they spend their lifetimes to sustain. I can only receive part of the property of my parents or my partner if they are “benevolent,” not inherently as a rightful equal partner. How sad and humiliating is this?

From domestic workers to CEOs, regardless of their class, women

cannot unburden themselves from care work or domesticity. We have just finished preliminary research on women working in the informal sector, which shows that 50-60 percent of their earnings goes into raising their children, while the rest goes towards family expenses (including clearing their husbands' debts); meanwhile, most of my friends and family are spending a fair share of their income to “buy out” independence, outsourcing the domestic and care work to these same informal workers. This appropriation of women's labour is much easier than making the men and the rest of the family share the burden. This also means that we, the privileged ones, would much rather avoid the uncomfortable negotiation with our partners/family, as long as we can have our “me time,” hang out with our friends, pursue our hobbies (read: activism) and buy whatever we please for ourselves and our loved ones.

Our first generation of feminists

**The question of gender justice was central to the Bangladesh Constitution in 1972. Articles 28, 29 (1) and 19 (3) promise equal rights and opportunities for every citizen regardless of gender, class, and ethnicity. The constitution also recognises the necessity of women's participation in making decisions both in the private and public spheres. Yet, after five decades of collaborative efforts by women's movement, civil society and UN organisations, women have failed to emerge as equal citizens.**

were not very different; they demanded equal rights in the streets while continuing to be the domestic goddess at home – an impossible standard to achieve. Hence they have raised us to be strong and independent women as long as we are mindful of the comfort of our loved ones, while our fathers, brothers and husbands can be enablers without sacrificing any privileges. This is a perfect trope that allows neoliberalism to invisibilise the appropriation of labour and make women feel inept in every sphere (never good enough), all while celebrating “womanhood.”

These may well read as the “personal” problems of a particular class of women, but like everything else, they are part of a much larger structure of intersecting inequalities. By retaining the status quo at home, we are also allowing laws that sustain institutionalised discrimination against women – reducing every woman to a second-class citizen – to prevail, in particular discriminatory and mostly religion-based laws regarding marriage, divorce, dower, maintenance, child custody and guardianship, adoption, inheritance,

and property rights. Our activists have thus always believed that changing the law would change the status of women; such convictions led Bangladesh Mahila Parishad and other rights-based organisations to propose a Uniform Family Code in the 1980s, which is still waiting for legislative approval.

Meanwhile my fellow activists have fought a good fight, initiating laws like the Dowry Prohibition Act (1980), the Family Courts Ordinance (1985), the Cruelty to Women (Deterrent Punishment) Ordinance (1983), the Women and Children Repression Prevention Act (2000), and the Evidence (Amendment) Bill (2022), to name a few. I may be critical of some of their methods, but the fact remains that whatever rights we have as women were accomplished by our foremothers and elder sisters, through a long, collective fight. They have also shown that “the law” is not etched in stone; it can and must change to meet the need of the hour.

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movement, civil society and UN organisations, women have failed to emerge as equal citizens. Perhaps it's time we recognised that keeping women as subservient second-class citizens benefits society, which can extort their labour in the name of love and care. Perhaps pandering to the state for law reform or fighting against “fundamentalist” forces may not be the only battles we ought to be fighting. The bigger battle yet is to rattle the cage of domesticity, which ties women down and lets men run free.

So what if, instead of these spiritless Women's Day celebrations, we were to call on all women to go on general strike for a week? Refuse to cook, clean or instruct the house help, chaperone our children, care for the elderly, or go to the office; let's get some real “me time” for a change, and remind society/state of the everyday violence they inflict on women. Make everyone who upholds patriarchy bequeath their privileges to make way for an enabling and nurturing space for all. Women must ask for all of these and more, from the family, society and state, if we are to truly “embrace equity.”

# Using innovation and technology for gender equality



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The Covid-19 pandemic has accelerated a global digital and data-driven transformation, with digital technologies now being leveraged for work, leisure, and learning. Digital literacy has become almost as important as traditional literacy. As we move towards the Fourth Industrial Revolution (4IR) – defined by the increasing use of automation and artificial intelligence – digital skills have never been as prized as now. However, in many parts of the world, including Bangladesh, the digital revolution has left behind a critical part of society: our women and girls.

While Bangladesh has made remarkable progress in increasing access to digital technology for women and girls, a persistent gender-based digital divide has left many unable to reap the benefits of digitalisation. According to the 2020 GSMA report on mobile gender gap, women in Bangladesh are 29 percent less likely than men to own a mobile phone and 52 percent less likely than men to use mobile internet. Especially rural women, compared to their urban counterparts, find themselves more disenfranchised from technology – limiting their access to information, digital services, and opportunities. And when women and girls are connected to the digital world, many find themselves exposed to cyber violence that deters them from digital participation in political, social, and cultural life.

According to UN Women's 2022 Gender Snapshot, women's exclusion from the digital world has caused a loss of \$1 trillion for the economies of developing countries in the last decade – a loss that will increase by 50 percent by 2025 if nothing is done in this regard. Besides economic benefits, enhancing women's safe and equal access to digital technologies offers immense opportunities to address development and humanitarian challenges and spark innovative and creative solutions that meet women's needs and promote their empowerment.

Women's participation in the digital sphere is therefore not just a matter of gender equality – it is a prerequisite for sustainable development. And as the country moves towards “Smart Bangladesh” by 2041, as envisioned by the government, this vision cannot be achieved without women and girls playing active roles.

So, how can we harness the transformative potential of digital technology for women and girls in Bangladesh, while mitigating the potentially harmful risks associated with its use?

As a starting point, we must make greater and more sustained investments in increasing women and girls' digital literacy and familiarity with technology. This will enable them to participate effectively in the digital economy and gain access to digital services

such as education, healthcare, and online banking. E-commerce and technology-based businesses offer women more flexibility, helping them to manage both paid and unpaid work, which is essential for economic empowerment. The United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) has been working with the government and our partners to develop and implement innovative solutions that can bridge the gender digital divide in Bangladesh. For example, our *Aspire to Innovate (a2i)* initiative is providing training on digital literacy to thousands of female entrepreneurs, and through our teacher's portal, more than 200,000 female teachers now have access to high-quality online educational materials. We have also utilised digital technology to launch

women and girls.

And lastly, we must make online spaces safe for women and girls. According to a 2022 survey by ActionAid, almost 64 percent out of 359 surveyed women in Bangladesh reported having faced cyber violence. Unfortunately, cyber harassment and violence against women and girls are often not taken seriously, deterring them from using the internet and threatening their online freedom of expression. We must tackle the harmful social norms at the root of these acts of violence and set up legal and policy frameworks that educate and protect girls and women from cybercrimes. Besides helping women and girls to recognise, report, and recover from online abuse, we must also intensify our civic education, work directly with the perpetrators, often boys and men, to uproot harmful social norms and power dynamics that underlie their actions. UNDP has been working to reduce the adverse effects of cyberbullying by creating peer support networks, offering free digital security courses that aim to make the digital space safer for women and girls and extending



VISUAL: ABIR HOSSAIN

Anondomela, an online marketplace that enables women entrepreneurs to access new markets.

However, basic skills will not be sufficient: we must also promote women and girls in the ICT sector by developing their skills in areas such as coding, where they are still critically underrepresented. Together with the government and our partners, we provide ICT training to women to bring them into the country's IT sector. By enhancing their digital skills and presenting them with female role models, we can also increase their opportunities to pursue careers in science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (STEM) – a field that reportedly 75 percent of jobs will relate to by 2050. This will require concerted efforts by the government, academia, civil society and, crucially, the private sector.

Critically, women also need to be involved in the creation of and decision-making around digital technology. We must ensure that today's emerging data-driven solutions do not perpetuate harmful gender stereotypes and patterns of discrimination. Online content and technology need to be developed with and for women and girls in a way that responds to their specific needs and priorities within a regulatory framework that prioritises, protects, and promotes the human rights of

technical support to the Bangladesh police for strengthening cybercrime investigations.

This year's International Women's Day, under the theme “DigitALL: Innovation and Technology for Gender Equality,” serves as an important reminder of the immense potential that digital transformation holds for accelerating gender equality and women's empowerment, but also the risk it bears for repeating and amplifying existing patterns of gender inequality.

As the world is evolving to become more digital, we must ensure we can keep up the pace and unleash the potential of women and girls to become active agents of change in this transformation. Digital technologies need to be used to accelerate progress on the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and gender equality, not to set us further back. A “Smart Bangladesh” with women and girls at the centre will help us eliminate the digital gender divide, not only in Bangladesh but worldwide, given the cross-border nature of digital transformation. To this end, UNDP, together with the United Nations family, remains a committed partner of Bangladesh in harnessing digital technology and innovation to advance gender equality and sustainable development for all.

## CROSSWORD BY THOMAS JOSEPH

### ACROSS

- 1 Humiliate
- 6 Racket
- 10 Henry VIII's house
- 11 Slow tempo
- 12 Accumulate
- 13 Look forward to
- 14 Tiara adorns
- 15 Hurry
- 16 Memorable time
- 17 Sailing hazard
- 18 Twisty fish
- 19 Source of vitamin D
- 22 Antlered animal
- 23 Metal sources
- 26 Classic

- western scene
- 29 Near the ground
- 32 Game caller
- 33 Sticky stuff
- 34 “Right away, boss!”
- 36 Stitches
- 37 Cleaner scent
- 38 Some skirts
- 39 Banded rock
- 40 Unaided
- 41 Walking aid
- 42 Salad servers
- DOWN**
- 1 Play places
- 2 Arm bone
- 3 Inflexible
- 4 Terrarium growth
- 5 Hosp. sections

- 6 Shop tools
- 7 Packing box
- 8 Like tumblers
- 9 Tourist stop
- 11 Treat as if a joke
- 15 Greedy one
- 17 Statuette
- 20 Fall back
- 21 Half of hex-
- 24 Goaded
- 25 Broadcast
- 27 Pay stub line
- 28 Flings
- 29 Sachet scent
- 30 Letter after psi
- 31 Lennon hit
- 35 Staff symbol
- 36 Rural sight
- 38 Yoga need



## SUNDAY'S ANSWERS

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

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