

# Empowering Bangladeshi women: Mano a mano with Sara Zaker

DOWEL BISWAS

Celebration can be a big word to behold when it is about the women in a society like ours. In the face of evil clutches of religious extremism, political reservation and societal backwardness, celebrating the achievements of women, whose indomitable spirit guides the way through for others should be made conventional.

The essence of WOW - Women of the World, an international festival, therefore lies in celebrating the indomitable feminine spirit that breaks through every hindrance and shatters the glass ceiling. Every year the festival celebrates the achievements of women, girls, and non-binary people by shedding light on the obstacles they face across the world.

Founded by Jude Kelly CBE, WOW - Women of the World is an international festival that started its journey in 2021 in Bangladesh. It organises community events nationwide by offering a platform to celebrate the voices of women and girls living within or beyond the margins of society.

The festival features counter-narratives of women who do not belong to the majority or mainstream but venture out in paths less traveled and succeed in paving new ways for gender equality. Through its various programmes it listens and speaks on societal injustice, success stories and aspects that are still a work in progress.

Sara Zaker, Founder and Chairperson of Mongol Deep Foundation - which is the strategic partner of the festival along with the British Council, and CCD Bangladesh - attended this year's WOW Festival in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil in November.

Describing her experience there, Zaker said, "Before I set foot at the peace-building conference in Bangkok, one of my senior colleagues had told me to



PHOTOS: SHAHREAR KABIR HEEMEL



find strength and beauty in talking to people coming from all parts of the world." "The festival is not about the common perception. The festival is about celebrating women as they do their best to achieve their respective goals. For instance, we talked about the hurdles women with PhD degrees and high quality of life face in their everyday lives during the WOW festival of London and Rio."

"The same might not be true for

Bangladesh but we are not that behind. Women in this country are shattering every hindrance in their paths and achieving extraordinary pursuits and goals, why shouldn't we celebrate it then?" asked Sara Zaker, a feminist spokesperson herself.

"See, there are different phases of empowerment and it is dependent on respective social structure, scope of development, and societal readiness of acceptance. Equality, harmony, and feminism have always been integral to our culture. Maybe it is slightly different than the Western version of feminism but it is all the same in spirit," Zaker emphasised.

"So at WOW, our panelists try to discuss the achievements of women and hurdles they face to bring about a comprehensive programme, filled with soulful panel discussions, art exhibitions, and performances to engage the audience and bring forth development," she said.

"Of course, we have a big dream about WOW. We have plans to make this platform work for women empowerment. But I feel there's a need for organic growth in everything. We have a vision but I think it will be best if it grows naturally," Sara concluded expressing her dreams regarding the platform.



## ‘Omor’s’ first look to be unveiled on December 31

The eagerly awaited film *Omor*, directed by Mohammad Mostafa Kamal Raz and featuring Sariful Razz, is nearing its debut as shooting wraps up. Raz, in his fifth cinematic venture, is set to reveal the first look on December 31, with Siddique Ahmed credited for the screenplay.

The director expressed excitement, mentioning the completion of the confidential 25 day *Omor* shoot in September. "The team collaborated smoothly, and the focus has shifted to post-shooting dubbing and finalising edits. The first poster is set to be revealed on December 31, with grand plans for a festival release," he said.

## Film Companion lists Badhan as one of 2023’s notable heroines



Azmeri Haque Badhan made a captivating debut in Bollywood with Vishal Bhardwaj's directorial *Khufiya*. Despite her limited screen time, her impeccable acting prowess forged a compelling on-screen chemistry with the renowned Bollywood actress Tabu.

Film Companion recently unveiled a list featuring Bollywood heroines who have left a lasting impact with their performances this year. Notably, our Bangladeshi actress Badhan has earned a place on the list.

Film Companion described Badhan's character, Heena Rehman, as "intensely enigmatic and alluring, capturing your attention irresistibly." The accolades poured in for the Bangladeshi star, who, with her indomitable personality, effortlessly stole the spotlight from Tabu.

# COUNTRYWIDE

## Sand lifting threatens riverside villages

OUR CORRESPONDENT, Benapole

A local influential man has been indiscriminately lifting sand from the Harihar river in Jashore's Manirampur upazila, posing erosion threat to many riverside villages.

The sand extraction is allegedly being carried out by Manirampur Municipality Panel Mayor Kamruzzaman Kamrul.

Local people alleged that Kamruzzaman has been extracting sand from the Harihar river with locally assembled dredger machines and filling up different municipality grounds.

Currently, filling up of a municipality field, by carrying sand from the river through a large pipe, is going on.

Earlier, Kamruzzaman filled up the ground of Prabhati Bidyapith Government Primary School near the office of Manirampur Assistant Commissioner (Land) by carrying sand from the same spot.

Meanwhile, fearing river erosion people living in Taherpur area along the banks of the Harihar river filed a written complaint to the upazila administration to stop the heinous act.

Expressing their disappointment, local residents said one of Kamruzzaman's men Rabiul Islam installed two dredger machines in the

river in mid-November and has been extracting sand from Taherpur area since then.

Hired labourers engaged by Rabiul has been continuing the illegal act from every evening till the next morning.

One of the plaintiffs Sajeda Khatun said her two-storey house is on the bank of the Harihar river and due to the mindless sand extraction, she fears that her house may collapse in the river at any time.

Rabiul said he has been lifting 25 to 30 trucks of sand every day and levelling the municipality ground as per the directives of Kamruzzaman.

Contacted, Panel Mayor Kamruzzaman said he is not doing anything wrong, adding that sand is being extracted from the river for the greater interest of the townspeople.

While talking, Manirampur Municipality Mayor Kazi Mahmudul Hasan said Kamruzzaman filled up the ground in front of the newly constructed three-storey building of the municipality, build at a cost of Tk 4.25 crore, by lifting sand from the Harihar river.

Manirampur Upazila Nirbahi Officer (UNO) Zakir Hossain said they were looking into the matter in an urgent basis.



PHOTO: COLLECTED

Sand is being extracted from the Harihar river in Jashore's Manirampur upazila.

### No bar

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ministry last week asked the authorities to take measures so that political programmes except electioneering do not take place from December 21 until the day of election.

The BNP, its allies and several left-leaning political parties have boycotted the election demanding a non-partisan polls-time government.

To press home their demand, the parties have been enforcing strikes and yesterday announced a non-cooperation movement.

The BNP and other parties boycotting the election was an "isolated matter" that would not affect the election, Alamgir said.

The only one or two incidents of violence that had taken place would not make an impact on the election, he added.

### MP suspended

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stipulated time, the district AL would recommend his expulsion to the party's central committee.

Zafar, who was denied party ticket for the January 7 polls, is running as an independent. While campaigning in Pekua on Tuesday, he vented his frustration over not being nominated.

Salauddin Ahmed, the AL nominee for Cox's Bazar-1, lost his candidacy over defaulting on loan. Major General (ret'd) Syed Mohammad Ibrahim, recently expelled chairman of Bangladesh Kalyan Party, is running for this seat.

Zafar on Tuesday said he was contesting as an independent because the AL allowed "party independents" to participate in the election. He said he would foil the conspiracies against him with the help of the people of his constituency.

## Despite walkover from AL

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in Rangpur division, including Gaibandha-1 where sitting JP MP Shameem Haider Patwari is contesting.

The JP took part in the 2008 national election as a partner of AL-led grand alliance. The party ran in 49 constituencies but won only in 27 where the AL withdrew its candidates.

JP nominees could not win in any of the remaining 22 constituencies where the AL candidates had also run.

In the 2014 parliamentary polls, the JP won 29 seats where the AL did not field any candidates following a consensus over seat-sharing.

In the 2018 polls, the AL left 26 seats for the JP resulting in the latter's win in 22 constituencies. JP nominees lost their security deposits in 145 constituencies where both the AL and JP aspirants ran.

JP high-ups think such easy wins will not happen this time as the party nominees will have to fight against independents as well as JP rival candidates who may emerge as their

major challengers in at least three constituencies -- Brahmanbaria-2, Nilphamari-3 and Pirojpur-3.

JP presidium member Rezaul Islam Bhuiyan is running for Brahmanbaria-2. Although the AL has withdrawn its candidate from this constituency as part of an understanding, chances are slim that Rezaul will win, said local JP leaders.

This is because Rezaul

Besides, Rezaul will also have to fight against his father-in-law Ziaul Haque Mridha, a former JP MP who is running as an independent.

In Nilphamari-3, five strong independent aspirants, including four from the AL, are competing against JP nominee Rana Mohammad Sohail. Former JP MP Kazi Faruk Kader is also vying for this seat.

In Pirojpur-3, JP aspirant Mashreikul Azam

understanding, Sherifa has to face AL leader Khosru Chowdhury who is running as an independent.

JP chief GM Quader's nephew HM Shahriar is likely to face a tough competition in Rangpur-1 as the opposition chief whip Mashiur Rahman Ranga, who was expelled from the JP, is taking part as an independent.

In Satkhira-2, two "AL independents", including the sitting MP, have made the battle of ballots difficult for JP nominee Ashrafuzzaman, JP insiders said.

JP nominee Masud Uddin Chowdhury MP, who is running again for Feni-3, will have to face challenge from Rahim Ullah, a strong independent aspirant.

Some constituencies are known to be JP strongholds. Those include Thakurgaon-3 (Hafiz Uddin Ahmed), Rangpur-3 (GM Quader), Kurigram-1 (AKM Mostafizur Rahman), Kurigram-2 (Panir Uddin Ahmed), Patuakhali-1 (ABM Ruhul Amin Hawladar), Kishoreganj-3 (Mujibul Haque Chunnun) and Narayanganj-5 (AKM Salim Osman).

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will have to face sitting JP lawmaker Rustam Ali Farazi who is running as an independent.

JP chairman's wife Sherifa Quader, a sitting MP from a reserved seat for women, is vying for Dhaka-18. Although Habib Hasan, sitting AL MP from this constituency, has pulled out as part of an

## ‘One-sided’ election to deepen crisis

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means the participation of the parties that pose a challenge in a competitive election.

"I doubt if voter turnout would reach 25 percent," he said.

Debapriya Bhattacharya, distinguished fellow at the Centre for Policy Dialogue, said, "This is not an election. It can rather be termed an attempt to hold a special election."

"Although the last

two elections had constitutional legitimacy, those lacked political and moral legitimacy."

If the lack of accountability and legitimacy is not addressed, the economic progress will be dealt a major setback.

Badiul Alam Majumder, secretary of Sushashoner Jonno Nagorik (Sujan), said, "The legality of the election commissioners' appointment is questionable. The polls

schedule and election are also questionable. This monopoly of an election will do further damage to the economic and political situation of the country."

Security Analyst Air Commodore (ret'd) Ishfaq Ilahi Choudhury said according to some people, there is no freedom of expression. "If that were the case, one would not be able to publicly criticise the government."

Former Bangladesh

Bank governor Salehuddin Ahmed said the government often highlighted the external problems facing the economy while irregularities in the banking sector and additional expenditure for projects remained unaddressed.

If politics is not on the right track, accountability will not be ensured and the right policy will not be adopted, he added.