



VISUAL: SHAIKH SULTANA JAHAN BADHON

Save us from the saviours

We still see a version of 'progress' whose standards are set by the West



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Though women's "empowerment" is an indicator for development, it's at risk of losing its transformative edge. Globally, empowerment has been framed as a doable, reachable, and measurable goal; yet, it is highly context-specific, fluid, and messy. When we see the nature of many empowerment projects (set up by Western donor agencies), we can track it back to the era of Western colonialism, when women became a prime focus of "civilising" projects. Education for girls and women sought to produce domesticated "good women" who would maintain hygienic homes and respect their husbands (Hunt, 1990); the contradictions of colonial extraction also fostered "bad women" who were forced to leave rural homes for the lives of sex workers in the city.

When colonialism redrew the boundary between moral and immoral, it was mostly women who were targeted for the "saviour projects," under the banner of "social reforms." The irony is that colonialism left behind its material, discursive, and policy formulation legacies, which the once-colonised nations still follow. The construction of gender and gender equality in contemporary South Asia has been shaped in distinctive ways by historical processes of colonialism.

Colonial social reforms for women were always a highly charged political affair. The reforms brought some positive changes, but benign neglect has typically been the norm. The feminist historian Lata Mani demonstrates women were neither the subjects nor the objects in the debates about abolishing various traditional practices; they were merely the grounds on which the meaning of "tradition" was debated. The point that colonial debates on social reforms were often less about women per se and more about the nature of indigenous culture or tradition has resonated widely in the context of many different cases (such as how the Devadasi were categorised as sexually immoral beings and, consequently, lost their land rights). The Hindu Widow's Re-marriage Act, 1856 was enacted to liberalise the condition of upper-caste Hindu widows who could remarry under the provisions of the law. The Act, with more ambivalent results, brought under its ambit women from subordinate castes who had not previously suffered similar restrictions against remarriage. The women of subordinate castes who could remarry previously without any penalty were newly subject under the provisions of the Act, which included a compromise that restricted the property rights of the remarried

widow to its restrictive inheritance regulations (Carroll, 1983).

Global economic power might be starting to shift, but the power to name, represent, and theorise is still located in the "West." In the third world nations, we see a version of "modernity," "progress," and "equality/empowerment" whose standards are set by the West. According to the United Nations Population Information Network, women's empowerment comprises five components: women's sense of self-worth; their right to have choices; their right to have access to opportunities and resources; their right to have power to control their own lives; and their ability to influence the course of social change to create a more just social and economic order. In this new rhetoric of women's empowerment, the "third world woman" was conceptualised as an autonomous and sovereign subject who freely made rational choices in the market. She was thrifty, hard-working, entrepreneurial, and a good manager of resources. She controlled her reproductive body, kept her family small, and exercised her right to vote. However, at an epistemological level, there was no discussion of what it meant to frame development programmes and policies in terms of an autonomous female subject. This imagined "third world woman" did not bear any resemblance to the rural woman in whose name she was deployed. This idea and image were so celebrated in development seminars and Western media that the imagined woman was substituted for the woman on the ground. That is, the idea became more real than the real itself, or what Ramos termed a "hyperreal woman," and development organisations and NGOs were at the forefront of translating the women's empowerment mandate into practice.

In the post-1970s environment of neoliberal development policies, the NGO emerged as a hybrid institution that took over many of the functions traditionally reserved for the state. In particular, NGOs have targeted the "third world woman" as key to social transformation, a global mandate to integrate women in all aspects of development work. In doing so, many such organisations followed the footsteps of the West, which created an obsession of "50 percentism," which was set as a parameter for equality, empowerment, and development. While this 50 percentism is a valid criterion in cases of sex ratio, health, and nutritional needs, it does not tell the whole story in other domains and can instead lead to erroneous conclusions. An example is the excitement over

equal participation of women in parliaments. When political parties are themselves under the grip of money, muscle power, and corruption, and when there is lack of accountability and transparency, can the presence of a certain percentage of women make our polity more citizen-friendly?

South Asian NGOs are unique in their vanguard position in the global NGO landscape. India, the world's largest democracy, has a mind-boggling 3.3 million NGOs which include developmental NGOs, community organisations (COs), and grassroots organisations (GOs). Bangladesh has over 20,000 registered voluntary organisations and 2,137 registered NGOs which work directly with foreign funds. As early as 1996, the World Bank had termed the Bangladeshi NGOs as "some of the most effective agents for change in the 21st century."

As long as NGOs increased the number of women members in their programmes, the funds flowed in from donor agencies for these women's empowerment activities. It is equally important to note that these ideas are rooted in the Western historical experience, although they are "employed as if their meanings were universal and unequivocal" (Mercer 2002). Many critics suggested women must engage in development policy decision-making themselves in order to move beyond the "project trap" of donors. This has resulted in the participatory development model that encourages women to discuss their needs with NGO workers. The downside to this approach is that it still keeps women within a framework of development priorities (that is, as a welfare investment project) and does not intervene in the local power dynamics which ultimately sustain and reproduce gender and social inequalities.

It is indeed true that, in Bangladesh, NGOs have wrought many positive changes. Today, women are far more visible in rural areas due to the heavy presence of NGOs. But it is important to underscore that the subaltern status of many women remains unchanged.

Three decades have passed since Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak wrote Can the Subaltern Speak? wherein, through the famous line, "White men saving brown women from brown men," she elaborated how deeply colonisation had seeped into our system, and how we are still carrying that baggage, and it reflects in our work, belief, and practices, even in the development sector. In the end, I believe (as a woman), more than saving, we need a voice -- our voice -- to tell our own stories; stories of struggle, victory, and of defeat as well.

No amount of writing will ever be enough to interpret this truth, to theorise it, to articulate it. But spotting these patterns can be the first step towards breaking away from this cycle. This is my hope for International Women's Day, where we not only represent each other, but give voice to each other and create space for each other instead of following in the footsteps of our colonisers.

Echoes of appreciation

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SHAMSAD MORTUZA

The usual scene at Shahbag crossing often resembles the unpredictability of a game of ludo, where the traffic signal acts as the notorious big snake, swallowing travellers just before they reach their destination. As the traffic officer's cane drops, adding an extra 15 minutes to the commute, sighs of helplessness are commonplace. During one such wait, I looked out my window and found a poster on which the BIRDEM General Hospital authority thanked the Dhaka metro rail officials for making the nearby station patient-friendly. There is something refreshing about this gesture. Our culture lacks the art of thanking. We normally take things for granted. In most cases, criticism overshadows our sense of gratitude. When we need to thank someone, cats eat our tongues. But when we do give thanks, or rather feel obligated to give thanks, we end up using flattery—with our greasy motivations too glossy to be overlooked.

On Thursday morning, when I went to the bank, I found the female officers in an uncharacteristically good mood, and realised that their source of joy was the Women's Day gift boxes kept behind them. As they gathered around the gift box, capturing the moment on their phones, it became evident that it wasn't just the material gifts that brought them joy. It was the top

comes a moment or two which allow you to appreciate life.

Asim Kumar Talukder, general manager of Bangladesh Railway (West Zone), set one such example. The 6am Rajshahi-bound Dhumketu Express, carrying about 700 Rajshahi University admission seekers, had a three-hour late start. Candidates were expected to enter their respective exam halls by 3:30pm., half an hour before the exam. When Talukder realised that the delay would jeopardise the future of hundreds of students, he personally intervened to give clearance to the train, changing the schedule of other trains. He spoke to the vice chancellor of Rajshahi University about allowing these students to enter the hall, albeit a little late. But Murphy's Law prevailed, as everything that was supposed to go wrong went wrong. At one of the stations, the train's engine failed. Talukder took the special initiative to bring in an additional engine that cost the students another half an hour. The students barely made it into the exam hall, but the coordination between the vice chancellor and the railway general manager gave these 700 students a chance to prove themselves at the highest level. They will always recall the day when two conscientious individuals made an exception for them, underscoring the principle that with great power



PHOTO: ANISUR RAHMAN

It is the selfless services which keep us sane in a mad, mad world.

management's genuine recognition of them and appreciation for them which lit up their faces and infused them with renewed purpose.

"Did the men get them, too?" I asked my dealing officer jokingly. "No, it's our women's day gifts." There was genuine pride in her voice. The simple act of receiving a gift had infused them with a renewed sense of purpose and determination. I looked around. Almost 70 percent of the officers were women. The purple boxes acknowledged their value and contribution to the workplace, reinforcing their importance in a male-dominated environment. In that moment, I realised the profound impact that even the smallest gestures of appreciation can have. International Women's Day gives us an occasion to annually recognise and appreciate the contributions of women in all walks of life. And sometimes, all it takes is a simple gesture of warmth and appreciation to remind them of their worth.

After the Bailey Road fire incident last week, one survivor publicly thanked the firefighter for saving her life. The sincerity with which she credited the rescue staff touched us all. Not too often do we get to hear or credit the heroism of ordinary men and women.

Yet, it is the selfless services which keep us sane in a mad, mad world. Imagine a world in which a teacher carries guns into his classes. He shoots at the leg of a student in an attempt to show off his prowess. Imagine a world in which a biology teacher at a Munshiganj madrasa cuts off the hair of nine Class 7 students for not wearing hijab. Just when you think that there is something essentially wrong in the world we live in (notwithstanding the apocalyptic reality of Gaza) and nothing to be thankful about, there

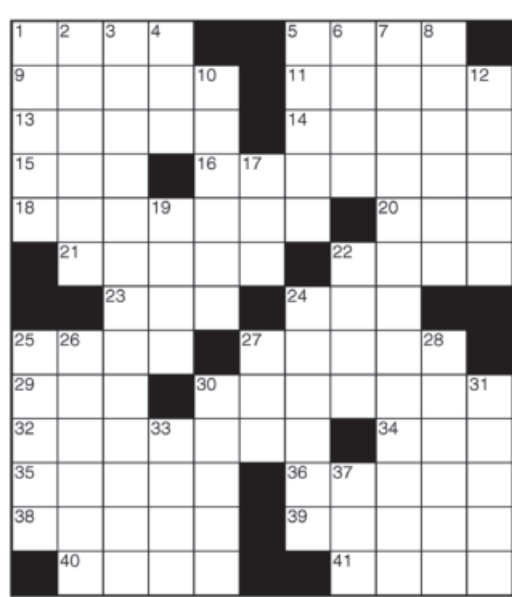
comes great responsibility.

Our system does not usually make deviations from the norm for those deemed "ordinary." There seems to be a different set of rules for the extraordinary. The city often comes to a complete standstill in the name of security blankets. Under such blankets, ordinary men, like the racially inferior muggle-born mudbloods from the Harry Potter series, become invisible. We see through the holes in the blanket to see the powerful ones strut and fret, and we wait for them to clear the scene so that traffic can flow again. For a change, ordinary boys and girls got a taste of privilege. The acts of kindness and compassion will reverberate throughout the lives of these students. I am sure this small gesture will go a long way towards inspiring others to emulate similar acts when they join in the service of the real world.

The instances of gratitude mentioned above demonstrate the beauty of and need for cultivating a culture of empathy and responsibility. The exemplary signage of the BIRDEM officials, the gifts from the bank employers to their female colleagues, the heartfelt thanks given to the firefighter by a survivor, and the personal intervention of the railway man underscore the kind of empathy and humility we need in life in order to take a pause from the thankless rat race. The appreciation for these acts on social media proves that people are not shy about showering words of warmth when they see that service is prioritised over self-interest and power is wielded responsibly. These remarkable individuals deserve gratitude for going out of the ordinary to do something extraordinary and teaching us the beauty of empathy and integrity.

CROSSWORD BY THOMAS JOSEPH

- ACROSS**
- 1 Dearth
 - 5 Dance bit
 - 9 Freshly
 - 11 Met performer
 - 13 Annual visitor
 - 14 Trig topic
 - 15 Greek vowel
 - 16 Pecan candies
 - 18 Claret, e.g.
 - 20 Hot blood
 - 21 Colander's kin
 - 22 Sibillant summons
 - 23 Hoppy brew
 - 24 Fan cry
 - 25 Investment choice
 - 27 Mouthwash target
 - 29 Ball
 - 30 Service parts
 - 32 Doing well
 - 34 To's opposite
 - 35 Unspoken
 - 36 "The Godfather" group
 - 38 Sculpting medium
 - 39 Move sinuously
- DOWN**
- 1 Surgery tool
 - 2 Some marbles
 - 3 Breakfast item
 - 4 Young fox
 - 5 Intent look
 - 6 Circus sight
 - 7 Breakfast item
 - 8 Raft movers
 - 10 Local resident
 - 12 Stopwatch button
 - 17 French article
 - 19 Fuse together
 - 22 Place for a Paris picnic
 - 24 Domains
 - 25 Winter footwear
 - 26 Florid
 - 27 Salon stuff
 - 28 Fast run
 - 30 Lugs
 - 31 Enjoys the tub
 - 33 Orange cover
 - 37 Copying



SATURDAY'S ANSWERS

| | | | | | | | | | | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| B | E | A | D | | C | O | P | E | S | | | | |
| E | L | D | E | R | | A | D | A | G | E | | | |
| A | L | O | N | E | | S | I | N | G | E | | | |
| S | I | R | | S | P | E | N | D | E | R | | | |
| T | E | N | D | E | R | | | O | D | E | | | |
| | | | | | E | N | O | S | | R | O | D | |
| | | | | | D | A | F | T | | E | L | A | N |
| T | E | N | | | S | A | V | E | | | | | |
| A | C | T | | | | G | E | N | D | E | R | | |
| B | L | E | N | D | E | R | | | E | M | U | | |
| L | A | N | A | I | | | | | A | D | L | I | B |
| E | R | N | I | E | | | | | L | A | T | T | E |
| S | E | A | L | S | | | | | | M | A | S | S |