

Cultural interventions required to reform deep-rooted patriarchal norms

In conversation with Dr Fauzia Moslem, president of Bangladesh Mahila Parishad.



Fauzia Moslem

The Daily Star (TDS): After August 5, women and female coordinators of the movement appear to have gradually become less visible in initiatives and discussions. This raises an important question: can the discourse on state reforms truly represent the approximately 51% of Bangladesh's population who are women, particularly in state-building and equitable resource distribution?

Fauzia Moslem (FM): The core issue is society's flawed mental framework. The ideologies at play behind this are the main reason. Throughout history, women have actively participated in movements but remain unrecognised.

Olympe de Gouges, a key figure in the French Revolution, challenged the exclusion of women from the Declaration, which only referred to "citizens of France" without specifying women. Instead of recognition, she was executed. Ironically, working-class women ignited the revolution, yet their contributions were erased. The belief that women should not hold power persists even in the 21st century.

Women are actively mobilised during movements but are often sidelined once they conclude. Throughout history, movements such as those in 1952, 1969, 1971, and 1991 have propelled women forward, yet their struggle for recognition persists. Now, women must take the initiative to solidify their position in society, actively advocating for their rights and continuing to push for progress.

In this context, a sectoral approach focusing specifically on women is needed, as society as a whole often fails to accept them. This is precisely where the importance of the women's movement lies.

The reform committees lack female representation, prompting Mahila Parishad to submit recommendations. Our key proposals include direct voting for reserved women's seats in Parliament, equal property inheritance rights to reduce financial dependence, and legal protections against gender-based violence and child marriage.

Most reform commissions have to address these issues in some form. While the Constitution guarantees equal rights

Quota reform demonstration held by students at Shahbagh on July 10, 2024.

PHOTO: ORCHID CHAKMA



in public life, this should extend to personal life, where women face the most discrimination in inheritance, marriage, and divorce. Religious discourse often limits women's opportunities, reinforcing systemic inequalities. True reform demands women's inclusion in decision-making and policies that uphold their rights.

TDS: How do you assess the situation for women following August 5?

FM: Misogyny has become more visible in Bangladesh, particularly following the August 5 incident, which marked a significant increase in anti-women rhetoric. Misogynistic forces, along with a conservative societal mindset, have started to dominate certain spaces. If you observe social media, you'll notice a shift.

By discussing issues like clothing

and religious sentiments, these forces are attempting to claim control of this space. They are trying, and while I would not say they have succeeded yet, their attempts are undeniable. We must remain vigilant about this growing communal and misogynistic group. It is not just the women's community, but society as a whole must stand up.

The problem is twofold: while women have made significant strides, society as a whole still has not evolved in its understanding of women's independence. Some individuals may have, but many still proudly say, "I allow my wife to work." Why should a husband have the authority to permit or forbid his wife from working? That decision should belong to the woman alone.

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- » Societal transformation cannot happen in isolation; both men and women have roles to play in ensuring human rights. The broader fight for human rights must go hand in hand with the fight for gender equality.
- » Understanding society and how to shape activism within it is crucial, and women must play an active role in this process, thereby establishing their position in society themselves.
- » Maternity should be recognised as a social responsibility, and the state must act accordingly to ensure supportive policies.
- » While the Constitution guarantees equal rights in public life, this should extend to personal life, where women face the most discrimination in inheritance, marriage, and divorce.
- » Women must be proactively included in policy making—through quotas if needed—to ensure their voices are heard and their concerns addressed.

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