

Men's fear and women's 'just rights'



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"Whenever the question of women's rights arises, excuses like religion or culture are used to stop it. Why?" This question was asked by a young woman from a Catholic family in Argentina. On another occasion, the same question came from a Sudanese Muslim woman. I am sure the same question exists in the minds of countless women in Bangladesh, too.

Everywhere—in homes, on the streets, in religious places—a number of men are eager to bring up religion whenever a women's issue comes up. Often, we come across many men who are not religious themselves but try to use religion or culture to oppose women's choices of clothing, lifestyle, occupations, etc. Regardless of their connection to religion, most men's justifications tend to converge when it comes to women. This is evident across various faith systems not just in Bangladesh but across the world.

In the current Muslim inheritance law, the person who seems disadvantaged when a woman gains equal rights is the man, primarily the brother(s). If there is no brother, then the uncle(s) and their sons on the father's side get a portion of the father's property instead of the daughter(s) getting all of it. But were all those who started the panic over equal property rights just these brothers and uncles? It doesn't seem so. Many in those crowds have daughters of their own. If their daughters get equal rights, what is their problem? Not many who protested equal inheritance rights have much property. What is this constant fear about, then, when it comes to women's rights? Or are they being used as pawns by interest groups?

In Muslim family law, the reason for a woman's smaller share of property has been that the man or men in the family would bear her full responsibility. But if this assumption no longer holds true, why won't today's religious scholars be open to updating the interpretations? In several countries—Turkey, Iraq, Tunisia, Morocco—religious scholars have taken steps to revise the law.

In Hindu and Buddhist societies, the tradition used to be giving a woman wealth or dowry during marriage. Sons inherited the father's property, daughters didn't get any share. Now, in India, equal inheritance rights for women and men have been provided legally. But in Hindu-Buddhist minority families in

Bangladesh, girls are still deprived, which is justified using religion.

In Bangladesh, the number of families where men provide for women is rapidly decreasing. In fact, among the poor, a significant number of households are run by women. In middle- and upper-class families, more and more women are working. Many women now carry the responsibility of financially supporting their families. Some argue that since women get a share from both their father's and husband's properties, they already receive more. However, after receiving a large share of inheritance from his father, doesn't a man also keep an eye on his wife's property?

It's often assumed that all adult women are married, that their marriages are stable, and that they receive all their legal rights. But, research, field observations, and lived experiences show none of these are fully true. Unmarried, divorced or widowed women are excluded from these considerations.

There has been many cases where the inheritance that married women receive from their fathers exists only on paper. Most women still lack a stable place of their own. In some cases, their husbands pressure them to bring property from their fathers, while their brothers pressure them not to take it. If a woman takes her full share, she risks losing her connection with her natal family—the right to return, visit, or be loved.

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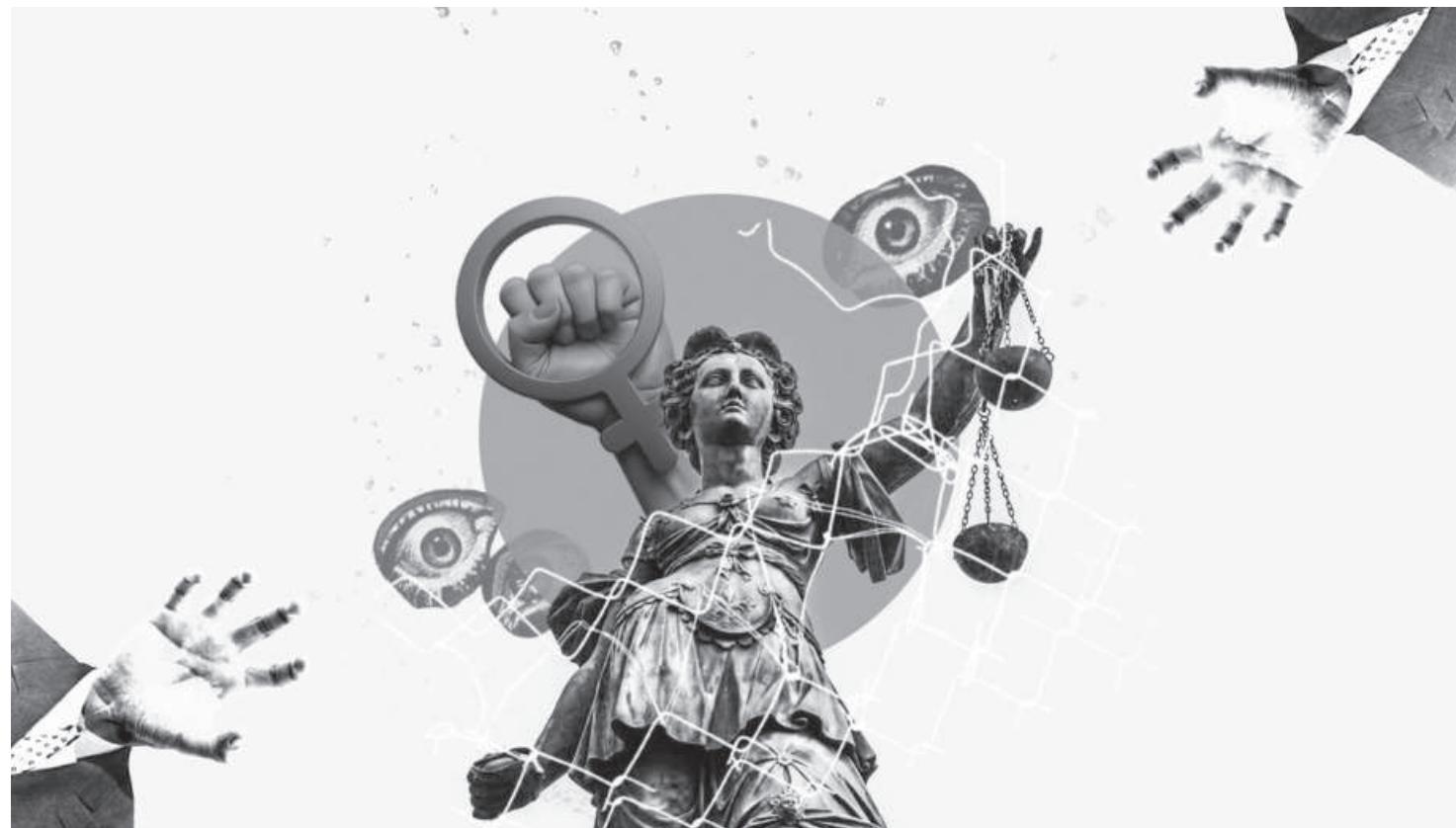
A woman's right to her husband's property is negligible, and often more theoretical than real. In both villages and cities, there are painful stories of cruelty and deprivation. Research shows that in rural farmers' families, a woman's working hours exceed those of men when counting all agricultural tasks, livestock care, and household work. Yet, her rights over property, maintaining which she has spent countless hours, remain uncertain. If she

one room structure on someone else's land. She lives there with her sick mother, caring for and working hard to provide food for her. Her father had a small piece of land; her only brother took almost all of it, saying her share was spent on her dowry during her wedding. That marriage didn't last. She returned home. The brother didn't take her or their mother in. He says he can't afford to feed them.

So now, women of two generations—

she has no daughter to look after her.

Inside and outside the home, many women in Bangladesh go through painful struggles. There are countless teenage girls whose lives are at risk of turning out like those of Yasmin, Tonu, and Munia. And those who survive such odds still face harassment every day. It is hard to find a girl or a woman who has not been teased or attacked by unruly males or thugs while walking on the street. Lately, my



VISUAL: SHAIKH SULTANA JAHAN BADHON

manages the household with her husband, she might retain use of the property, but not ownership. If that partnership breaks down, everything—land, house, animals, crops—can disappear overnight. And if she also has no inheritance from her parents to fall back on, she is left with nothing. She may have to survive under the care of her son(s). But what if the sons refuse to do so? We often hear that sons take responsibility for ageing parents and therefore deserve a larger share of property than their sisters. But that is not always the reality. There have been countless cases where sons were found not caring for their elderly parents. Daughters, on the other hand, have been often found to have taken on that responsibility.

Let me give you an example. In my maternal grandmother's village lives a girl named Pemi, who has speech impairment. Her hut is a

one denied property, the other with poor, uncertain income—live in a hut. Pemi tries to find work day and night to keep her mother alive. Sometimes she requests a local *hujur* for the treatment of her mother's unknown illness. Sometimes, mother and daughter cry together—not a normal sob, but a terrifying, heart-wrenching wailing. The villagers understand: Pemi couldn't bring along her child. Her former husband, backed by law, custom and patriarchal power, kept the child with him. Thinking about the child might be the one thing that breaks this hardworking girl's resilience.

In Dhaka city, in our neighbourhood, I recently heard of a bitter quarrel among brothers who own a building. None of them wants to take care of their mother. They calculate the cost of her stay, food, everything. This mother's misfortune is greater because

students—current and former—tell me of a newer kind of harassment: men standing in front of them and threatening them for not wearing a burqa, using obscene language. These men want women to be submissive and/or send them back indoors. And wearing a burqa doesn't provide much safety either. I've heard of bitter experiences suffered by my students who wear it.

People in Bangladesh live under a net of oppression and discrimination. For women, this net is even more complex. If men's groups see the woman who gave birth to them as inferior, what does that say about them? These people sometimes insist on giving women "just rights" instead of "equal rights." But if rights are to be truly just—based on labour, contribution, hard work, and roles—then women should receive more than men. Will they accept that?

JnU crisis exposes the rot in higher education



BLOWIN' IN THE WIND

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When demonstrators were allowed to stage a protest in front of the Jamuna state guest house—now the official residence of the chief adviser—demanding a ban on Awami League as a party, Section 144 was paused. But it came into effect when another group of protesters attempted to use the same location to press their demands. At least 50 students and teachers of Jagannath University (JnU) were injured by police action when they attempted to reach the venue. Leaders of the National Citizen Party (NCP), who convened the first protest, argued that theirs was a national cause of larger significance, not an institutional one.

If anyone is in doubt, the misty shower sprayed by city corporation water cannons during the heatwave symbolically depicted the blessings that the first protest received. In contrast, the JnU protesters' demands were considered unworthy of disturbing the sanctity of Jamuna. Yet, only months ago, these student bodies acted together to oust an autocratic regime. The preferential treatment of one group over another is adding to a growing resentment that allows us to rewrite the Orwellian maxim: "some students" are "more students" than others.

Fortunately, the University Grants Commission (UGC) chairman announced last evening that the government had accepted the JnU students' demands—hours after the protesters launched a hunger strike to make their collective voice heard.

But this situation demanded intervention much earlier since the proposal to solve the JnU crisis has been with the government for a considerable time. Students are frustrated by the delay in rebuilding a second campus including housing options. The army was given verbal instructions to conduct a feasibility

fact for publicly humiliating him. Prof Md Rois Uddin, general secretary of the JnU Teachers' Association, who was present during the parley, later told the press, "You can't even take the hit of a water bottle, yet baton charge our students and break their limbs. If any bullets are fired here, let the first bullet hit me in the chest."

The pronouncement of solidarity

that used to offer degree courses before Dhaka University came into being was upgraded to a university in 2005. The upgrade was superficial, as it did not involve any significant infrastructural investment. The government wanted the university to raise its revenue through tuition fees. Later, it was brought under the same financial arrangement as other

be addressed in the next annual budget. They didn't want any budget cuts, which may deter the army from engaging in construction work. They wanted ECNEC to approve their proposal. And they urged the government to offer a housing stipend for 70 percent of their students until there are proper residential facilities. Following the police action, they further demanded a thorough investigation to ensure punishment of the perpetrators. These demands are far from sudden. Years of neglect have formed the foundation of these demands.

Then again, public sentiment has been quickly shifting. The widespread sympathy that the students garnered started to lose ground fast due to the prolonged roadblocks, traffic paralysis, and media coverage. As commuters remained stuck in gridlock, businesses suffer, and patients are barred from going to hospitals because of the protests, the moral high ground of the protesters is on the verge of ruin.

The dwindling public empathy put the interim government at risk, too. As a by-product of student activism, the government can hardly afford to alienate the next generation. Then there are the ever-nagging conspiracy concerns: is the government using this crisis as a smokescreen to divert attention from other issues? A dirty laundry

After receiving assurance from the UGC chairman that all their demands would be met, students and teachers of JnU called off their protest and said all activities of the university would resume today. However, that does not mean the underlying problem is solved. We must use the JnU crisis as a catalyst for reform. For that, dialogue-based conflict resolution mechanisms are needed. The government must listen. The protest around Jamuna was not an isolated disturbance. The noise

geopolitical drama, the JnU protest offered a more manageable crisis. But if this is a diversion, it is a costly one. The government has yet to declare any reform commission for education. It seems to be ignoring the sector, which is evident from the number of campus closures, clashes, and the removal of vice-chancellors (VCs). The firefighting mode of the government may sound like an empty excuse. The proxy solutions are far from effective. The government needs to cure the illness affecting our higher education sector. Our universities lack funding for research and development. The abuse of autonomy needs to be checked, and transparency in hiring and accountability across the board are a must. There should be an end to politically appointed leadership. Focus should be on updated curricula to prepare students for an international job market.

The protesting students wanted to make sure that their cause would be addressed in the next annual budget. They wanted ECNEC to approve their proposal. And they urged the government to offer a housing stipend for 70 percent of their students until there are proper residential facilities. Following the police action, they further demanded a thorough investigation to ensure punishment of the perpetrators. These demands are far from sudden. Years of neglect have formed the foundation of these demands. list has been aired: the Chattogram port's access and management, the UN's proposal for a humanitarian corridor to Rakhine state through Bangladesh, the unresolved Rohingya crisis, and informal "push-in" tactics by India. The list is serious and, quite frankly, puts our national security and regional diplomacy at risk.

Against the backdrop of such a



At least 50 students and teachers of Jagannath University (JnU) were injured by police action when they attempted to reach the chief adviser's official residence on May 14, 2025.

PHOTO: PALASH KHAN

study without any formal work order or budget allocation. The NCP protest's success probably gave the JnU protesters (and other groups) the wrong signal that the only way to solve a crisis is to reach the shore of Jamuna. They discovered the truth the hard way.

An attempt by Mahfuj Alam, the information and broadcasting adviser, to disperse the protesters from in front of Jamuna was met with hostility and derision. The adviser, an exponent of the student-led mass uprising and an ally of the student cause, was struck on the head by a water bottle thrown by a protester. He later blamed a specific political

by teachers and the lukewarm attempt by the adviser to pacify the protesters, with the rehearsed advice to stay away from provocation, exposed a systemic dysfunction. It revealed a significant trust deficit between marginalised student groups and their national leadership. The spirit of July, informed by an innate desire for an end to all forms of discrimination, gets defeated when members of perceived "elite" institutions or parties are treated with greater leniency. The rift has reinforced class and institutional divides.

Central to the JnU crisis is a list of broken promises. An institution

state-run universities. The university planned to relocate from its current location in Old Dhaka to a second campus. In 2016, the government allocated 200 acres in Keraniganj and a development budget of Tk 1,734 crore. The project got stalled due to bureaucratic inertia. The Executive Committee of the National Economic Council (ECNEC) found the development project proposal (DPP) faulty and refused to approve it. As a result, over 20,000 students continue to attend classes on a congested campus in Old Dhaka without dormitories or decent facilities.

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be addressed in the next annual budget. They didn't want any budget cuts, which may deter the army from engaging in construction work. They wanted ECNEC to approve their proposal. And they urged the government to offer a housing stipend for 70 percent of their students until there are proper residential facilities. The slogans shouted were cries for dignity, fairness, and a future worth studying for. Something is rotten in our higher education system. Today, JnU is showing signs of illness. Tomorrow, it could be some other institution pushing beyond tolerance. Let's not wait for the rot to spread. Let's listen before we act.