

Our misfortune is that we couldn't create

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The event was organised by the women and children's affairs ministry to mark Begum Rokeya Day 2025, observed on the 145th birth anniversary and 93rd death anniversary of Begum Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain, the pioneering advocate of women's rights and education.

Referring to the role of women and girls in the July uprising that toppled the fascist regime, as well as the contributions of this year's awardees, Yunus said, "We should leave space for the girls to lead the nation."

He lamented that "even after 100 years, we have not been able to create another Rokeya", saying the country

had failed to fulfil her vision. "We have talked but have not been able to move forward. We need to find out why we couldn't."

Calling Rokeya's ideas "revolutionary", he urged people to follow them in everyday life. "And if we can do, it will be meaningful," he said. Yunus also announced that the Bangla name of the ministry has been changed from "Mohila O Shishu Mantranalay" to "Nari O Shishu Mantranalay".

Four women were awarded for their contributions in their respective fields.

Rubhana Rakib, a physician, received Begum Rokeya Padak in the category of women's education

(research) while Kalpana Akter, a labour leader, got it in the category of women's rights (labour).

Nabila Idris, a rights activist, won the prestigious award in the category of human rights while Ritu Poma Chakma, a member of Bangladesh Women's National Football Team, got it in the category of women's awakening (sports).

Women and Children Affairs Adviser Sharmeen Murshid chaired the event.

A cultural programme, including the screening of a documentary titled Ami-e Rokeya, was held to highlight Begum Rokeya's contributions to promoting women's education and combating child marriage.

Tobacco use costs society Tk 87,544cr

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major tactics by tobacco companies to lure in youths.

As many as 72 percent of the POSs displayed tobacco products openly while 66 percent placed tobacco products beside candy, chocolates and toys.

The study recommended a comprehensive ban on POS advertising, a ban on flavoured cigarettes and prohibiting sales

of single sticks to reduce the affordability and appeal of tobacco products among youths.

The findings represent an important warning about both the scale of the problem and the gaps in collective response, said Hossain Zillur Rahman, executive chairman of PPRC.

The tobacco challenge is deeply rooted and that advocacy needs to be more strategic, he said, highlighting that protecting the young generation

must be viewed as a national responsibility.

He further stressed that stronger law reforms and a more effective tobacco tax structure are essential to reducing tobacco consumption.

Sharmeen Yasmeen, chairperson of Public Health Foundation Bangladesh, and Mostafizur Rahman, lead policy adviser at Campaign for Tobacco-Free Kids, spoke among others.

We were picked up, detained, and tortured

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located between Matsya Bhaban and the International Mother Language Institute. There, they were detained and interrogated by then officials of DGFI and other agencies.

"There was a television behind us. The interrogator was watching it while questioning he. He was calling the TV channels - notably DBC, Shomoy TV and Ekattor TV - instructing them to

change new and correct scrolls. The channels then aired news portraying a 'normal situation'."

Though the safe house looked abandoned from outside, it had modern facilities inside, Hasnat said.

They were interrogated till 2:30am, allowed to sleep briefly, and then woken during Fajr prayers when a new team resumed questioning. "During interrogation, a DGFI officer told me

that on October 28, 2023, he had thwarted BNP's movement of millions within 10 minutes, and that it would not take him any time to suppress our movement the same way.

"We were isolated, tortured and misrepresented before the nation."

He added, "ADC Junaid tortured me inhumanely while I was at DB office. We began a hunger strike and were eventually released on August 1."

Will the dystopia for women ever end?

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TDS: There seems to be no clear plan for the remaining recommendations. Was political priority lacking?

Shireen: This is an unfortunate reality. Many have wondered if our report was simply "sent to cold storage". The July uprising was followed by a period of euphoria and sky-high expectations of changes that would lead us to a new Bangladesh, which would be free of discrimination. The huge participation of women in the uprising made us, those in the women's movement, hopeful that at last a historic opportunity had arisen in which our long-standing demands had a real chance of being addressed.

The formation of the Women's Affairs Reform Commission was both a reflection and recognition of the importance assigned by the interim government to introduce reforms towards the elimination of discrimination against women and towards gender equality. The commission members worked hard to formulate recommendations and proposals for institutional reforms as well as changes in existing policies and programmes covering 15 different sectors and thematic areas.

These recommendations were grouped into three categories: short-term actions the Interim Government could adopt (doables), medium-term reforms for the next elected government to consider (desirables), and long-term transformative changes addressing decades of discrimination and resulting disadvantages, violations and deprivation reflecting what women want (dreams). We wanted to present our proposals in the public domain to initiate a public discourse and debate on the "woman question".

We did not expect that all 423 recommendations would be accepted, nor that those accepted would be implemented overnight. We expected debate, discussion, disagreement and critique, which would result in greater awareness about what women want and the challenges women face in their struggle for emancipation and autonomy. What we did not anticipate, however, was the verbal abuse that was directed at us by certain quarters. The silence of the advisory council in the face of the attacks we were subjected to was disappointing.

While the ratification of ILO Conventions C155, 187 and 190 was a win for both the Women's Affairs Commission and the Labour Commission, our ambitions were taller and our prospective horizon was broader. We hoped to bring about a sustained change in the architecture of state sponsored women's advancement.

The women and children affairs ministry, the nodal ministry to address the proposals as a whole as well as to act on those of direct relevance and under its rules of business, formed a committee of ministry officials who identified 71 proposals as key priorities that fell within their mandate.

TDS: Recommendations like a uniform family law, and recognising sex workers as "workers", faced conservative objections. What was the

reasoning, and was your report "filed away" under pressure?

Shireen: Bangladesh Mahila Parishad has campaigned for a uniform family law for over 40 years, during which governments have come and gone, yet it never received a serious hearing. We proposed creating a civil option that would enable those who wish to have their personal lives governed by gender equality provisions in law to do so, while others could subscribe to existing personal laws which are religion-based and provide for different rights for women of different religious identities. This, too, met with fierce opposition.

We recommended the inclusion of sex workers under the protection of labour laws. This was recommended by sex workers themselves during one of the many consultations we carried out with women of different professions, occupations, socio-economic backgrounds, etc. Floating sex workers face police harassment, the grabbing of their hard-earned income and a lack of legal rights. Their recognition under labour laws would provide protection, complaint mechanisms and basic dignity owed to them not only as workers but also as citizens.

Whether backlash led to the report being sidelined, I don't know; we were never informed.

The advisory council is composed of people with different ideological leanings, and not all are committed to women's rights and dignity. It is not surprising, therefore, that, for instance, the Women's Affairs Reform Commission was excluded from the National Consensus Commission's deliberations.

We weren't allowed to present our proposals and our views. In fact, the five reform commissions formed later as a second batch were excluded from the consensus commission's process. The heads of these five commissions wrote jointly to the chief adviser seeking an opportunity to speak with the Consensus Commission, but received no response.

I believe Prof Muhammad Yunus, who has consistently supported women's progress and livelihood improvements through his work especially in microcredit, is committed to furthering positive change for women. However, not everyone around him shares that vision, nor do they have the courage to stand up against conservative backlash. This limits his ability to pursue the implementation of the reforms recommended by the Women's Affairs Reform Commission.

Many recommendations from other commissions remain unimplemented as well, suggesting a broader structural issue and a general abandonment of the reform agenda, rather than the women's commission being uniquely sidelined.

TDS: You have recommended a permanent, independent women's commission. Why is it necessary for women in Bangladesh?

Shireen: We have long advocated for a permanent, independent women's commission with quasi-judicial powers to address issues that courts,

administration or policymakers often cannot or do not.

The problems and challenges women face are multidimensional, requiring a multisectoral response. The mandate for reform lies with multiple duty bearers, not just the women and children affairs ministry. A holistic response requires actions to be taken by the government machinery as a whole, ranging from the ministries of law, justice and parliamentary affairs; social welfare; health and family welfare; education; information and broadcasting, etc.

Women's issues cut across all sectors of the government, parliament and judiciary. They intersect with economy, politics, media, family and society, creating a complex cycle of discrimination, deprivation and disadvantage.

A permanent and independent commission would ensure regular coordination, monitoring of progress and holding the government accountable - beyond symbolic gestures like International Women's Day announcements. Data collection alone is insufficient. Continuous, evidence-based action is essential, making the role and responsibility of such a commission crucial.

TDS: You proposed raising parliamentary seats to 600, with 300



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reserved for women. What was the rationale and how was it received?

Shireen: My proposal was based on several points. When Bangladesh created a parliament with 300 seats representing 300 constituencies, the population was much smaller. Today, 300 MPs are insufficient to represent a population of 180 million.

Secondly, the demonstration at the upazila parishad level of a second vice-chairperson on a reserved seat for women provided a successful example of what can be done to increase women's voice and representation in governance. Decentralisation ensures grassroots voices are included in the shaping of national policy, making representation substantive rather than symbolic. Why not introduce a similar principle for the national parliament?

Thirdly, this proposal would increase women's representation without having to create special constituencies such as required by the popular proposal for 100 reserved seats for women, which would rotate at the end of each term. The proposal is not only logistically absurd but also does not take into account the political careers of the women and men who would be excluded from running in the constituency whose turn it would be for the reserved seat for women.

Fourth, the existing 300 general seats remain open for all genders, while 300 seats are reserved for

Lone genocide museum closed

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genocide, and letters written by martyrs. The collection also includes over 10,000 photographs and around 2,000 video clips, and numerous rare documents.

Due to prolonged closure and lack of maintenance, the condition of most of the valuable artefacts are now deteriorating day by day, said museum officials.

"Initially, we planned to keep the museum closed for a few days due to fear of political unrest. But later, we faced severe financial crisis. That is why, we could not open it," said a trustee board member, seeking anonymity.

The museum's operational expenses are being borne from interest on bank deposits of trustees and government funds.

Sheikh Baharul Alam, a trustee of

the archive and museum, said, "Due to political reasons, the funds and initiatives to reopen the museum have been suspended. We have spoken to many people to restart it. We did not receive the expected response."

He added that the trustee board manages the museum. "Electricity bills, staff salaries, and other operational costs amount to Tk 60 to 65 lakh annually. All kinds of government and non-government funds have been stopped. There is no alternative."

There were around a dozen employees in the museum. All of them have been terminated due to fund shortage, he said.

Moniruzzaman Moni, commander of the Khulna city unit of the Muktiyoddha Sangsad, said the museum should be opened urgently to preserve the history of the Liberation

War and genocide.

ASM Zamshed Khondaker, deputy commissioner of Khulna, could not be reached over phone, despite repeated attempts.

Contacted, Sadekul Islam, secretary of Bangladesh National Museum, said, "We [the museum authority] handed over the Khulna Liberation War museum to its trustee board around two years ago. We don't know about its update."

The construction of the museum's new building was completed in 2024 at a cost of around Tk 32 crore in the city's South Central Road area with the aim to preserve rare evidence of the Liberation War and genocide of 1971.

A trustee board is authorised to operate the museum under the Bangladesh National Museum.

The six-storey building was opened for visitors in May last year.

Tangail Saree weaving industry wins

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ongoing session.

Talha, also president of the UNESCO General Conference, said the Tangail Saree is the daily wear of many women in Bangladesh, which served as the inspiration behind seeking international recognition for this weaving industry.

He dedicated this achievement to all weavers and women of Bangladesh, saying the recognition adds a new dimension to Bangladesh's efforts to protect intangible cultural heritage.

Talha said Bangladesh has many intangible cultural elements worthy of UNESCO recognition and added that stronger documentation and

more trained personnel would help secure future recognitions.

Earlier, the 20th meeting of the Intergovernmental Committee was inaugurated by India's External Affairs Minister, S Jaishankar, on December 07. UNESCO's newly appointed Director General, Khaled El Enani, joined the event.

Cops struggling to trace suspect

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filed a case making Ayesha, who had taken up the job just four days earlier, as the sole accused.

She allegedly made away with a mobile phone, a laptop, gold ornaments and cash after the killings. The gold ornaments include a chain and earrings of slain Laila, whom the suspected killer stabbed at least 30 times.

A relative of the victims said they have yet to fully ascertain which valuables were taken from the house as

they were busy with the funeral rites.

The keys to the doors and other lockers were kept together on a key fob, which went missing a day before the murders. The family suspects that the house help stole the fob to get her hands on the valuables, he added.

Meanwhile, Dhaka Metropolitan Police (DMP) Commissioner Sheikh Md Sajjat Ali yesterday urged city residents to verify the identity of domestic workers before hiring them.

He recommended keeping a copy

of the worker's national identity card, a recently taken passport-size photograph and the names and addresses of at least two references to confirm their identity.

Such crimes can often be prevented if residents exercise caution, he said in a press release.

The DMP commissioner also reiterated the importance of properly filling out tenant registration forms and cooperating with police in gathering citizen information.

women. Transformative change requires structural and organisational reforms, not token gestures.

Manifestos are yet to be released. Early signs suggest slightly more attention to women's issues, but without clear plans or timelines, real outcomes are uncertain.

TDS: Recent surveys show 76 percent of women face intimate partner violence, yet awareness and reporting of specialised services remain alarmingly low. You designed a multisectoral programme on violence against women (VAW) two and a half decades ago. Why are these services still largely unknown?

Shireen: I was surprised and taken aback to learn recently from a survey finding that half of the women in Bangladesh don't know where to report abuse. Despite decades of implementation of the multisectoral programme (MSP-VAW), awareness campaigns and NGO initiatives, knowledge remains alarmingly low: only 2.2 percent know about one-stop crisis centres (OCCs), 12 percent about the 109 helpline.

A World Bank survey of OCCs conducted by Naripokkho revealed many constraints and quality concerns. However, these findings were not taken into account in the expansion of OCC facilities to more districts and upazilas. The MSP-VAW was based on an MOU between seven ministries as active participants, with the women and children affairs ministry as the lead. It appears that other than the OCCs, and the DNA Profiling Laboratory, many project components were never implemented.

Monitoring and supervision have been inadequate, and the women and children affairs ministry, for whatever reason, did not pursue the introduction and implementation of several other components such as specialised police training in investigation skills and the use of rape investigation kits, making police stations women friendly, introducing a "respect women" campaign across secondary schools in both private and public sectors, especially for boys by rolling out a specially developed module, as well as public campaigns to promote awareness of the problem along with the facilities offered by MSP-VAW through the use of mass media.

Thus, the opportunity for achieving a greater and more holistic impact was lost. An increase in conviction rates with the use of more robust evidence did not happen. A nationwide media campaign to publicise one-stop crisis centres did not take off, leaving awareness low.

TDS: Bangladesh has finalised its Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) report with two important reservations. How do these weaken women's human rights, 41 years after signing?

Shireen: Bangladesh signed CEDAW in 1984 with reservations on four articles. Due to the women's movement advocacy, reservations on articles 13(l)(a) (equal rights in family welfare) and 16(l)(c) (equal rights in

guardianship) were withdrawn in 1997. Of the two remaining reservations, one is on article 2, which obliges the state party to eliminate all discrimination against women and to bring into alignment all laws and policies with the principle of non-discrimination.

Continuing the reservation on article 2 implies the government's reluctance to commit to the spirit of the convention itself and take refuge in "ratified, but not binding in implementation".

Article 16.(g) guarantees equal rights and responsibilities in marriage and divorce, reflecting again that the interim government has persisted with the objections of earlier governments, reflecting a lack of political will to break away from the arguments made in 1984, despite the fast-changing reality.

The July uprising and the formation of the interim government, which included several human rights activists in the advisory council, offered hope for real change.

Unfortunately, it seems the interim government has preferred to continue business as usual rather than take up structural, institutional and fundamental changes.

The bureaucracy, with few exceptions, prioritises its own interests and resists change. Major reforms are hard to implement without support from the administration, whether by an interim or elected government.

TDS: How have the recent online harassment, trolling and misogynistic attacks on women's rights activists in Bangladesh affected their safety and work environment?

Shireen: At times, I feel we have taken three steps forward and four back - progress is limited and sometimes even reversed. Recently, the women's movement protested the attacks on the Women's Affairs Reform Commission as well as the attacks, intimidation and threats to women and girls, especially in public spaces, including in public transport through the "Narir Dake Maitree Jatra". It was organised by young activists, who boldly declared they are unafraid. For me and my fellow commission members, it was both reassuring and inspirational.

However, women have been reporting harassment, threats and sometimes physical and sexual attacks. The random threats women experience in public spaces, irrespective of the actual number of attacks, have caused many women to hold back. Many women who are employed outside their homes have continued to go out to work, but not without a sense of unease and discomfort.

TDS: On Human Rights Day, what urgent message would you give policymakers for protecting women's rights in Bangladesh?

Shireen: My message is for the government, society and everyone is Naripokkho's slogan "Nari ke manush hishabe chinun, janun ebong shomman korun" - recognise women as human beings, regard them as such and respect them. For women's equality and nothing less, and for men's equality and nothing more.