

Gender Equality is still a Far Cry in Bangladeshi Politics

Ms. Munima SULTANA (Bangladesh)

Lucky Akter's entry in the mainstream politics in Bangladesh was a little bit dramatic. She was not well known by people until the first week of February this year despite her success in leading her educational institution. It was some slogans she delivered with her bold voice and encouraging words that jumped her popularity, raising the number of supporters from hundreds to thousands, and even to hundreds of thousands in a day or two. Sparked up by her strong message, hundreds and thousands of people from all over the country gathered at Shahbagh Square in central Dhaka for two to three months.

Lucky eventually emerged as a symbolic figure of the movement, which later came to be known as the Shahbagh Movement in Bangladesh that was developed from protests against the sentences given to the war criminals of the 1971 war of independence (Liberation War).

A meritorious student of a university college in Dhaka City, Lucky now dreams of becoming a leader in national politics despite the fact that it is not at all an arena for women in Bangladesh.



Ms. Lucky Akter

Female leadership in Bangladesh, even though both ruling and main opposition party chiefs are women, remains almost void since long ago. Student politics has been a popular mode of climbing up the leadership ladder to the national level in this country, but this nevertheless has applied only to men so far. Female student leaders either have not been able to survive in the male-dominated political field or have become more devoted to their profession and family, giving up their ambition to become leaders of the nation. This practice has been continued for decades, and for this reason there are only a very limited number of women leaders in the country.

A few more new faces of young female leaders joined Lucky as central figures in the Shahbagh Movement. But after the movement, female leadership has turned weak compared to the level when it was started, and they have become lost from view.

Lucky said, even in such a situation, she wanted to remain in the world of politics and vowed to fight against male supremacy there. She stressed the improvements in

student facilities that have been realized under her able leadership, such as improved food at canteens, bus services and hotels in educational institutions. Her leftist party recognized her role in the student politics. Lucky said she would gain stronger leadership with better quality on her party level, and eventually boost it to the national level.

As Bangladesh has yet to create the culture of developing leadership through education, the emergence of young women in politics has been rare. The present government has tried to encourage women to raise their voices, by increasing the number of reserved seats allocated for women in the national parliament to 50 along with five cabinet posts.

But still, true leadership in Bangladesh is a far cry as people continue to raise questions about leaders' quality and attack on their activism. Lucky is not exceptional. Many people, mainly men, cast doubt on her leadership asking what she has done in Shahbagh. They do not want to accept the fact that thousands of people felt strength at Shahbagh when they listened to her slogans with powerful voice.

Amidst the situation, the trend that brings hope is that non-governmental organizations have been trying to promote women's leadership in all sectors across the country. Since 2008, Bangladesh Association of Women Leader (BDAWL) has been working with great speed to raise awareness about the need for greater engagement by women in political decision-making. So women are hopeful that their leaders will ascend from the grass-root level to the top level in the near future. Lucky and other young leaders are also a beacon of hope for them.