

Rights for women and decency for men

by Mahmudul Hasan

IN HER book, *The Great Scourge and How to End It* (1913), the British suffragette Christabel Pankhurst articulated her conception of the movement to establish women's right to vote in the following slogan: 'votes for women and chastity for men' (p 7). More than a hundred years later, based on my decades-long research on feminist issues, I would like to condense my ideas about the debate on women's rights into a rhythmic phrase: rights for women and decency for men. That is to say, while women are denied their rights, it is the lack of decency in many men that stands in the way of women's rights and dignity. I shall illustrate this in the following discussion, sprinkled with anecdotes.

Once, a friend invited me to lunch. I was not married at that time. There were other guests who came with their families. During lunch, I was seated next to a man whose wife was a good friend of the wife of the friend who hosted the lunch. As we were eating, both women were in a near-constant, engaged in informal conversation, laughing and revelling in the chitchat. They seemed to have met after quite some time.

We were in the midst of our lunch, and suddenly the man next to me yelled, 'Oi go tumi ko!' (Honey! Where are you?) As a Bangladeshi, I was familiar with the informal vernacular expression and understood that he was calling his wife. But why was she needed at that time?

I thought something went wrong, even though apparently everything was in order for us.

As his wife quickly left the light conversation and rushed in, he said to her, 'Fani daso' (Give me water). She most obediently poured a glass of water for him and left to re-join the tête-à-tête with her friend. I didn't notice any sign of complaint on her face; she didn't seem to find his behaviour strange. But that spousal interaction and the wife's readiness to provide culinary care for her husband in all circumstances have remained firmly entrenched in my mind ever over two decades.

The truth is that the water jug and glasses were right there in front of the man. But he was not ready to make an effort to pour water into a glass. His wife had to come from another room for that. Like a pampered child, he completely depended on his wife for



- New Age

all gastronomic purposes, even pouring water into a cup.

Was the man's conduct driven by love? If yes, was there a need to put it on public display?

Honestly, that was not the first time I had seen such a gastronomic dependency of husbands on their wives.

I have known another couple who have been married for decades. The

husband has never been to the kitchen to cook or prepare food for himself or for others in the family. Even when the wife is unwell, the culinary responsibility falls squarely on her shoulders.

The husband considers it unmanly to cook or do kitchen chores. His persistence and strategy to get them done by his wife do not change, irrespective of her health condition.

The man is educated and, in the eyes of society, a kind and warm-hearted husband. But at mealtimes at home, rain or shine, he expects his wife to meet his gastronomic needs. If the meal is not ready or the bed is unmade, for example, he has a specific way of giving signals to his wife: he starts clearing his throat, which his wife interprets as his desire for food or the bed to be made.

Once, an academic couple (both university professors) invited some male students to dinner at their house. The students were fully aware that the couple shared household chores and did not have a domestic helper. The students came to dinner, ate, and were kind enough to carry the plates to the sink, but they left them unwashed. They were not ignorant of who would have to wash them eventually. In a sense, these students behaved in a better way compared to those men who leave plates on the dining table after eating and expect others to wash them.

These male students grew up with the assumption that there would always be someone (in most cases, a woman) to wash their dirty plates and drinking vessels. This time it was their professors, and once they are married, it will be their wives — in the absence of wives, their sisters or mothers, who would wash their plates. Perhaps, at bottom, their behaviour reflects the kind of parenting they received. Unfortunately, most parents, especially mothers, do not encourage their sons to wash utensils or to be responsible for household chores, even though they use a different parenting style for their daughters.

It is not difficult to find devout husbands who spend a lot of time performing rituals at home or in masjids but never do household chores. As women are expected to bear the burden of domestic activities, unlike their husbands, they rarely have exclusive time to get engaged in extra devotional activities to connect with the divine.

The above sketches underscore, at least in part, what is wrong with the thinking of men. Many of them seem to inhabit a decency desert when it comes to gender relations. Such Muslim men do not follow the example of Prophet Muhammad, who, as is common

knowledge, did household chores despite his great responsibilities in public life. Accordingly, in the humorous story, 'Pointish Maund Khana' (Thirty-five Maund Food [1928]), Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain laments: 'People [Muslims] of this country do not obey Prophet Muhammad in a real sense.'

As a matter of fact, what I am arguing here is that, in a domestic setting, it is far removed from decency to expect female family members to always cook and wash plates and utensils. Decency demands that, in normal circumstances, husbands and wives, fathers and mothers, sons and daughters, and brothers and sisters share household responsibilities. Unfortunately, women have accepted household work inequalities as a normal part of daily living, and men seem to have taken advantage of this internalised perception.

I have been researching and writing about issues related to women and gender for decades. In this essay, I have steered away from academic jargon and sought to get down to the bare bones of the entire debate. Given the gender dynamics in the current social order, especially in Bangladesh, I would like to make the following submissions: What the liberation of women requires is equal access to available resources and opportunities. These help them become competent and confident and live their lives to the fullest. Equally, for women to have a respectable and dignified place in society, men need to have a clear conscience and maintain decency in gender relations. This can manifest in a number of ways, ranging from gender complementarity in household responsibilities to treating women with respect in workplaces and other public settings. Men's sense of decency is essential to all of these. In its absence, sadly, gender injustices and asymmetries may continue unabated.

Lastly, in this postmodern world, there are also women who avoid basic domestic responsibilities and relegate household chores — in some cases, even the raising of children — to domestic helpers or other caregivers. They tend to view cooking and other household tasks as demeaning and below their status. But that is a topic for another discussion.

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CHILE 50 YEARS

Had there been no coup in 1973

At the time, 50 years ago on Monday, the coup was seen as not just an attack on the Popular Unity government of Salvador Allende, writes Vijay Prashad. It was an attack on the third world.

IMAGINE this scenario. On September 11, 1973, the reactionary sections of the Chilean army, led by General Augusto Pinochet and given a green light by the US government, did not leave their barracks.

President Salvador Allende, who led the Popular Unity government, went to his office in La Moneda in Santiago to announce a plebiscite on his government and to ask for the resignation of several senior generals. Then, Allende continued his fight to bring down inflation and to realise his government's programme to advance the socialist agenda in Chile.

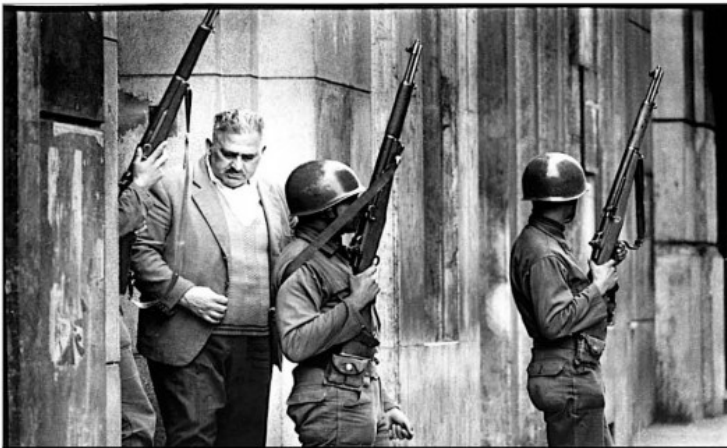
Until the moment when the Chilean Army descended upon La Moneda in 1973, Allende and the Popular Unity government were in a pitched fight to defend Chile's sovereignty, particularly over its copper resources and its land as they sought to raise sufficient funds to eradicate hunger and illiteracy and to produce innovative means to deliver health care and housing. In the Popular Unity programme (1970), the Allende government founded its charter:

'The social aspirations of the Chilean people are legitimate and possible to satisfy. They want, for example, dignified housing without readjustments that exhaust their income; schools and universities for their children; sufficient wages; an end once and for all to high prices; stable work; timely medical attention; public lighting; sewers; potable water; paved streets and sidewalks; a just and operable social security system without privileges and without starvation-level pensions; telephones; police; children's playgrounds; recreation areas; and popular vacationing and sea resorts.'

The satisfaction of these just desires of the people, which are rights that society must recognise, will be a preoccupation of high priority for the popular government.'

Realising the 'just desires of the people' — a laudable objective — was possible amidst the public's optimism for the Popular Unity government, Allende's administration adopted a model that decentralised the government and mobilised the people to attain their own 'just desires.'

Had this model not been interrupted, the depositors in the government's social security institutions would have remained on directive councils with oversight of these funds.



Chilean army soldiers during the September 11, 1973 coup d'état.

- Wikimedia Commons/Koen Wessing

Organisations of slum dwellers would have continued to inspect the operations of the housing department tasked with building quality housing for the working class.

Old democratic structures would have continued to strengthen as the government used new technologies (such as Project Cybersyn) to create a distributed decision system. 'It is not only about these examples,' the programme noted, 'but about a new understanding in which the people participate in state institutions in a real and efficient way.'

As Chile's people, led by the Popular Unity government, took control over their economic and political lives and worked hard to improve their social and cultural worlds, they sent a flare into the sky announcing the great possibilities of socialism.

Their advances mirrored those that had been attained in several other projects, such as in Cuba, and boosted the confidence of people across the Third World to test their own possibilities. The eradication of poverty and the

creation of housing for every family was an inspiration for Latin America.

Had the Popular Unity project not been cut short, it very well might have encouraged other left projects to demand the satisfaction of just desires in a world where it was possible to attain them. No longer would we live in a world of scarcity, which impedes the realisation of these desires.

No Chicago Boys would have arrived with their noxious neoliberal agenda to experiment in the laboratory of a military regime. Popular mobilisations would have exposed the illegitimate desire of the capitalist class to impose austerity on the people in the name of economic growth. As Allende's government expanded its agenda, driven by a decentralised government and by popular mobilisation, the 'just desires' of the people might have eclipsed the narrow greed of capitalism.

If there had been no coup in Chile, there might not have been coups in Peru (1975) and Argentina (1976). Without these coups, perhaps the

military dictatorships in Bolivia, Brazil and Paraguay would have withdrawn in the face of popular agitation, inspired by Chile's example. Perhaps, in this context, the close relationship between Chile's Salvador Allende and Cuba's Fidel Castro would have broken Washington's illegal blockade of revolutionary Cuba.

Perhaps the promises made at the UN Conference on Trade and Development meeting in Santiago in 1972 might have been realised, among them the enactment of a robust New International Economic Order in 1974 that would have set aside the imperial privileges of the Dollar-Wall Street complex and its attendant agencies, the International Monetary Fund and the World Bank. Perhaps the just economic order that was being put in place in Chile would have been expanded to the world.

But the coup did happen. The military dictatorship killed, disappeared, and sent into exile hundreds of thousands of people, setting in motion a dynamic of repression that has been

difficult for Chile to reverse despite the return to democracy in 1990.

From being a laboratory for socialism, Chile — under the tight grip of the military — became a laboratory for neoliberalism. Despite its relatively small population of roughly 10 million (a 10th of the size of Brazil's population), the coup in Chile in 1973 had a global impact. At that time, the coup was not just seen as a coup against the Popular Unity government of Salvador Allende, but as a coup against the Third World.

That is precisely the theme of our latest dossier, 'The Coup Against the Third World: Chile, 1973,' produced in collaboration with Instituto de Ciencias Alejandro Lipschutz Centro de Pensamiento e Investigación Social y Política.

'The coup against Allende's government,' we write, 'took place not only against its own policy of the nationalisation of copper, but also because Allende had offered leadership and an example to other developing countries that sought to implement the New International Economic Order principles.'

At the third session of UNCTAD in Santiago in 1972, Allende said that the mission of the conference was to replace 'an obsolete and radically unjust economic and trade order with an equitable one that is based on a new concept of man and human dignity and to reformulate an international division of labour that is intolerable for the less advanced countries and that obstructs their progress while favouring only the affluent nations.'

This was exactly the dynamic that was derailed by the coup in Chile as well as by other manoeuvres of the imperialist bloc. Instead of promoting an order based on a new concept of man and human dignity, these manoeuvres resulted in the murder of hundreds of thousands of people's advocates (among them leftists, trade unionists, peasant leaders, environmental justice campaigners and women's rights activists) and prolonged the destiny of hunger and illiteracy, poor housing and medical care, and the general orientation of a culture of despair and toxicity.

Please read our dossier and share it. These dossiers — produced once a month — are a product of collaboration and hard work, a synthesis of

how we, as an institute rooted in popular movements, see key events of our history. The art for this dossier comes from the Salvador Allende Solidarity Museum, which preserved art from the Popular Unity period and from the struggle against the coup. We are grateful to the staff, and to ICAL, for our collaborations based on solidarity against the neoliberal ethic of parochial greed.

Two weeks before the 50th anniversary of the coup in Chile, Guillermo Tellier, the president of the Communist Party of Chile (PC), died. At his funeral, the party's General Secretary Lautaro Carmona Soto described how Tellier — with the coup's cordite still in the air — went to work in Valdivia to protect and then build the party as part of the broader resistance to the coup regime.

In 1974, Tellier was arrested in Santiago and subsequently held and tortured for two years in the Academia de Guerra Aérea. For another year and a half, Tellier was held in concentration camps in Ritque, Puchuncaví and Tres Álamos.

Released in 1976, he went into hiding and continued to build the party back to its fighting strength, joined the following year by PC leader Gladys Marín.

This was dangerous work, made even more dangerous when Tellier took over as the leader of the party's military commission, which managed the aid sent from Cuba to Chile and oversaw the creation and operations of the Manuel Rodríguez Patriotic Front, the PC's armed wing. Though attempts to assassinate Pinochet failed, broader work to build the movement for democracy succeeded. It is the bravery and sacrifice of people such as Tellier, Marín and countless — and often nameless — others, that brought the dictatorship of Pinochet and the Chicago Boys to an end in 1990.

The 1973 coup in Chile destroyed lives and suspended a process of great promise. Today, that promise must be revived.

Consortiumnews.com, September 8. Vijay Prashad is an Indian historian, editor and journalist. He is a writing fellow and chief correspondent at Globetrotter. He is an editor of *LeftWorld* Books and the director of *Tricontinental: Institute for Social Research*.