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Composition and propositions of Nari commission

by Md Mahmudul Hasan 03 May, 2025, 00:10

READING Begum Rokeya's 1931 speech 'Dhwongser Pathe Bongio Mussalman' (Bengal Muslims on the way to ruin) in the mid-1990s heralded a landmark moment for my initiation into gender studies. Around that time, I also studied Victorian English literature as a sophomore at Dhaka University and was introduced to the 'Woman Question' in nineteenth-century England. I learnt about the development of different waves of feminism that broadened the voices of women in various cultural contexts. Many of the gender issues that I encountered in books and other reading materials resonated with the conditions of women in Bangladesh society.

The above and other considerations eventually led me to complete a PhD in the field of feminist comparative literature at the University of Portsmouth (UK) in 2007. Over the decades, I have continued researching feminist literature. I have made dozens of international conference presentations on feminist literature and published tens of journal and newspaper articles on the representation of women in artistic and cultural products. Among the books I have coedited on related themes are: *Islam and Gender: The Bangladesh Perspective* (2016) and *A Feminist Foremother: Critical Essays on Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain* (2017).

One question I grappled with at the beginning of my research interests in feminist and women's studies was my gender. As a man, was I supposed to study and work on feminist issues?

During my undergraduate years at Dhaka University, a friend of mine from another department exacerbated this question by making fun of me for my concern for gender justice. Finding me too passionate about the rights of women, he once jokingly said that I might one day be ready to be pregnant to relieve women of the pain of bearing children.

I was not intrigued by his joke; I rather considered the comment a sign of ignorance. But the question whether a man can be a feminist haunted me for a very long time. I

knew that a man can be a feminist, because Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) was a great champion of women's rights. Moreover, in the history of women's rights in Britain, the first person to start the movement to establish women's right to vote in the country was a man — John Stuart Mill — who presented a petition for women's suffrage to the British parliament in 1866.

Despite all these, I looked for a way to articulate my position that men can be feminists and fight gender-based discrimination against women. I found it later.

During my PhD years in the UK, I read the writing of Duke University Professor Toril Moi. In the essay 'Feminist, Female, Feminine' (1989), Moi provides a convincing argument to suggest that men can be feminists without losing their gender identity. She states:

'A final problem raised by the distinction between feminist and female is the question of whether men can be feminists or feminist critics. If feminists do not have to work exclusively on female authors, perhaps they do not need to be females, either? In principle, the answer to this question is surely yes: men can be feminists — but they can't be women, just as whites can be anti-racist, but not black.'

This argument has remained deeply embedded in my consciousness. I see no contradiction between being a man and a feminist, or between being a woman and a proponent of men's rights. In my understanding, the entire concept of feminism is based on the overarching principle of justice which transcends gender differences. My concern for the plight of women emanates from my belief that everybody should be treated justly and fairly. If I see someone mistreated, I should try to do something irrespective of the gender identity of the victim.

A section of feminists seems to have got it totally wrong. In their pursuits of women's rights, they exhibit an anti-male sentiment. This fuels gender rivalry and generates gender-based antagonism and hostility between men and women.

For example, Shanghai-born Australian politician and feminist Irina Dunn said in 1970: 'A woman needs a man like a fish needs a bicycle.' Later American journalist and feminist Gloria Steinem (1934–) popularised this aphorism and put it in a glib slogan: 'A woman without a man is like a fish without a bicycle.' What all this amounts to is that, women are independent of men and can meet all their needs (including sexual and emotional ones) without men.

Such an attitude towards men results from a perceived anti-male feminist propaganda, which is as sexist as the frequent anti-women mindset found among many (not all) men. For example, the late Egyptian feminist writer Nawal El Saadawi said in her book *Woman at Point Zero* (1970): 'All the men I did get to know, every single man of them, has filled me with but one desire: to lift my hand and bring it smashing down on his face.'

Such feminist discourse promotes a normative dialectic that pits men against women, and women against men. It essentialises all men as perpetrators of gender-based violence and all women as their victims. It is upon this premise that some

feminist groups negate the possibility of men being champions of women's rights. To them, the term 'male feminist' sounds oxymoronic.

The composition of Nari Bishoyok Songskar Commission (Women's Affairs Reforms Commission) has reopened up the above debates in my mind. All the ten members of the commission are women, and the six dedicatees mentioned at the beginning of its over three-hundred-page report are also women. Considering the nari commission a female preserve reinforces gender essentialism and is the elephant in the room that is largely ignored by most commentators.

But what is the logic behind excluding men from the membership composition of the commission? Are men not needed to understand issues involving women, or does the interim government that formed the commission believe in demonising all men as essentially oppressive to women?

What is more, an overwhelming majority of the commission members are from one sector — NGO. And this NGO monopoly has deprived the commission of other much needed perspectives that could more accurately reflect a larger cohort of the country's population.

In its reports, the commission treaded the much-dreaded zone of Islam and gender issues, apparently without sufficient knowledge of the religion. We don't see a recognised scholar of Islam and gender in the commission. Nor is it known to have consulted such experts before producing the report. On what basis did it make the recommendations on issues involving Islam?

The scope of this essay does not allow me to deliberate in detail the question of Islam and women's rights — a topic on which I have done extensive research and written essays including 'Nasrin Gone Global: A Critique of Taslima Nasrin's Criticism of Islam and Her Feminist Strategy' (2016). Disregarding Islamic law and regurgitating some meaningless clichés, the commission has made unacceptable proposals regarding women's inheritance rights.

My coedited book *Islam and Gender: The Bangladesh Perspective* mentioned before provides a detailed discussion of women's inheritance rights in Islam as well as prostitution and other issues. Islam gives more inheritance to men in certain (not all) cases because of their greater financial responsibilities. One reason why sons get more inheritance is because, unlike daughters, they are obligated to pay mahr (marital gift) when they marry and are duty-bound to provide for their wives and children. However, the inheritance of the father and the mother is equal because their needs are similar; and brothers and sisters also receive equal amounts when they become inheritors. In other cases, as the late Egyptian scholar Yusuf Qaradawi shows in his book *The Status of Women in Islam*, women get a bigger share in inheritance. Qaradawi states:

'For instance, if a woman dies leaving a husband, mother and two brothers and one sister by her mother, the sister alone gets a sixth; whereas only one sixth is given to the two brothers. Also if a woman dies leaving a husband, a full sister and a brother by her father, the husband gets half the inheritance and the sister the other half,

whereas the half-brother gets nothing being merely an agnate. But if the half sibling is a sister and not a brother, she gets a sixth.'

So, the notion that Islam gives women half of what men inherit is imprecise. The religion gives sons a bigger share of inheritance, as they have to bear greater financial burdens; and it gives women more inheritance when they need more support. It is important to remember that Islamic inheritance law is based on equity, not equality.

Here I would like to mention the late American anthropologist and feminist scholar Elizabeth Warnock Fernea's comment on women's inheritance rights in Islam. In an essay titled 'Islamic Feminism Finds a Different Voice' (2000) published in *Foreign Service Journal*, she said:

'In America, the first states to grant women inheritance rights were Texas, California, Arizona and New Mexico, all of which were once under Spanish control. That means that Moorish — Islamic — law was the basis for American women's contemporary inheritance rights' (p. 25).

As regards sex workers, the commission seems to have overlooked or condoned the wrong of exploitation to which the sex industry subjects vulnerable women. Instead of addressing the scourge of women trafficking and forced prostitution, the commission has prescribed a palliative remedy which is unlikely to stem the root cause of the problem. Some decades ago, I was involved in a discussion with a friend who argued for promoting sex work in our country for economic development. I asked him bluntly: 'Will you allow female members of your family to be employed as sex workers to boost our national coffers?' He became silent and the debate ended there.

As regards Islam and gender, I would like to remind commission members and others of what Rokeya said in her 1911 essay 'God gives, man robs.' It is also worth mentioning what McGill University Professor Arvind Sharma stated about women's rights in Islam: '[Islam] ought to be studied before [it is] condemned: Who is to say if the key that unlocks the cage might not lie hidden inside the cage?' (*Feminism and World Religions*, 1999, p. ix).

On a final note, some of the recommendations the nari commission has made require rethinking and reconsidering. I suggest its composition be overhauled and its propositions revisited.

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