

## Women's policy: what is the fuss about?

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WHY so much noise about a policy which does no more than reaffirm commitments of earlier documents? The protests by a few religious clerics surrounding the declaration of the policy by the chief advisor give rise to suspicions of political machinations. The responses of some members of the advisory council also suggest, at the least, a lack of cohesiveness or coordination in decision making by the Council of Advisors. These events have diverted us from considering the content of the policy and its continuity with previous state commitments, and from formulating an action plan.

Let us first dissect the protests, which started a few days before the announcement. How is it that the ulema were threatening street action, using the mosque to incite hatred against the government and against women, even before they had seen the policy? Their claim was that the policy provided for equal rights to inheritance, and thus violated religious norms and codes. The protests have continued even after the policy has been published and made available, and after it is quite clear that it makes no reference to inheritance laws!

Islam is a religion of peace. And yet the ulema are deliberately breaking the peace by use of vituperative language and seditious threats of "civil war." An ever-ready madrassah brigade has been summoned into street action and, what is even more surprising, the Khatib of Baitul Mukaram mosque seems to have forgotten his official responsibilities. We are familiar with similar forms of destabilisation used in the past.

In 1961, for example, the ulema supported the right-wing parties in opposing the Muslim Family Laws Ordinance. The government, at that time, took a strong stand against the trouble makers, and the law has remained on our statute books for four decades and is in daily use throughout the country, benefiting millions of men, women and

children in the process. The uniformity of messages emanating from khutbas in certain mosques, their instigation to political rallies, and the op-eds in the right-wing media suggest considerable planning behind the scenes.

So, we need to figure out, is all this really about a rejection of a national commitment to gender equality? Is it really about any threat to religion or religious practice? Or is it something more calculated, and intended to serve the interests of certain groups — is it merely a diversionary tactic from the political movement for the trial of war criminals, or just another way of mounting a further challenge to the present government?

We presume that the caretaker government follows some official procedures for collective decision making, and that, when the chief advisor announced the policy on March 8, it had already been discussed and approved by the council. Does this imply that the chief advisor has gone back on the previous decision taken collectively by the council. Or have the four advisors acted on their own initiative to visit the Islamic Foundation, offer apologies and set up a "review committee." What is the validity of any decisions taken by such a committee?

There is nothing new in the policy itself, and, in fact, these commitments had been made earlier in the Constitution, in CEDAW, in the Beijing Plan of Action, the MDG and NSRP. Let us examine what the policy says.

Section 1 of the policy reviews official decisions and commitments to women's equality.

Section 2 lists the purpose and aims of the policy to ensure equality, security, empowerment, human rights, to address poverty of women, recognise their economic and social contributions, facilitate participation in public decision making and access to education, health and skill development, and protection for vulnerable women. These aims have never been in dispute, and different ministries have been mandated since the early seventies to implement programs in accordance with them.

Section 3 reiterates implementation of CEDAW

through review and reform of laws, prevention of misuse of laws or misinterpretation of religion contrary to women's interests, creation of awareness of rights, identification of children by both parents, including in voter identity cards. (It is unfortunate that the Election Commission has failed to observe this government rule, and women voters have been identified by their spouses.)

Sections 4 and 5 refer to legal and policy deterrents to violence against women.

Sections 7, 8, 12 and 13 refer to expanding access to education, health and shelter or housing, to creating opportunities for participation in sports and culture.

Section 9 recognises women's economic contribution, the need for expanding opportunities, and eliminating gender discrimination; it also refers to the need for safety nets and other facilities for working women. Political participation is to be facilitated through directly held elections to reserved seats in Parliament, and lateral entry of women in public services, diplomatic services, maintaining quotas in public employment. In acknowledging the government's responsibility for implementing the policy, section 17 reiterates provisions for monitoring mechanisms, which have already been in place.

The rightist frenzy is apparently over the right to property, which is referred to in section 9.13 as providing for "equal rights to and control over all moveable and immoveable property acquired through the market." This is a statement of the law as it stands in Bangladesh, and is not a re-statement of it or any advance! At least, that is true in theory. In practice, many women are deprived of their legal share in family property, and have little access to commercial loans, etc.

It is difficult to see the rationale for the objection to this section. And it is even more difficult to understand what drove the four advisors to go to the ulema if they had already read the policy and were aware of its provisions. Consultations on policy matters are a good precedent, but only when they are held in a

rational atmosphere, and with constituencies that are to be directly affected by such policies. The National Policy for Women's Development is an outcome of a national consensus on the need to eliminate gender inequality and to ensure women's advancement so that they can contribute more effectively to economic and social development.

The government's energy should now be directed to work out time-lined action plans, and allocate budgetary support. Ministries need to be mandated with specific goals and targets, which can be monitored effectively. It is time that governments stand by their words and make sure that equality and non-discrimination are maintained as guidelines for laws, policies and programs of action. Bangladesh needs to move forward into the future. Let us not forget that women's labour today sustains the Bangladesh economy, women's social capital maintains family well being. Recognising their rights will be a step in furthering their effective contribution to society.

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\* Hameeda Hossain is a freelance contributor to The Daily Star.