

Bangladesh: In defence of Sultana Kamal threatened by the Hefazat-e-Islam

Saturday 24 June 2017, by [AFHRD](#), [Amnesty International](#), [APC](#), [APFWLD](#), [Front Line Defenders](#), [HARTMETZ Annette](#), [ISHR](#), [PEN Bangladesh](#), [SAHR](#), [ULLAH Ansar Ahmed](#) (Date first published: 17 June 2017).

SAHR Statement on threat, including inciting violence, against Sultana Kamal by the Hefazat-e-Islam

South Asians for Human Rights (SAHR), a regional network of Human Rights Defenders, expresses its serious concern at the demands made by Hefazat-e-Islam, for the immediate arrest, exile from the country, and inciting of physical violence against Sultana Kamal a well known human rights lawyer and regionally and internationally respected human rights defender.

Hefazat-e-Islam is a coalition of Islamic hardline groups and organisations known for its provocation for inciting violence and killings in the recent years in Bangladesh. Hefazat's demands are a blatant denial of freedom of expression of citizens' voices and also a grave provocation for the extremist elements in the society.

The matter arose at a recent television talk show where Sultana Kamal along with others participated and a representative of Hefazat misconstrued a hypothetical argument which Sultana Kamal is stated to have made. A statement which she and others on the talk show made have subsequently been clarified and corrected.

SAHR urges authorities of the Government and the State of the People's Republic of Bangladesh, to oblige by the constitutional stipulations of the secular nature of the state, as well as the international obligations it has signed. SAHR reminds the government and the state of Bangladesh that the growing influence of religious extremism has so far contributed to violations of many rights and freedoms of the people of the country, including right to life, right to follow a religion of one's preference and freedom of expression. It urges the Government of the People's Republic of Bangladesh to provide Sultana Kamal with adequate protection for her safety, in order to enable her to continue to play the important and iconic role in society in defending the rights of all its citizens. Importantly, to take necessary steps to restrain and stop extremist groups from inciting violence, threats, and harm to Sultana Kamal and other citizens.

Sultana Kamal risked her life at an early age to create Bangladesh during the Liberation war in 1971, upholding the idealist wishes and common sentiments of the majority to create a secular Bangladesh. She was acclaimed as a freedom fighter, among many. Till now, she has been unwavering in upholding these very ideals in her numerous capacities as an adviser to the caretaker government, a human rights lawyer and a human rights defender at regional and international level as well as an intellectual in contemporary Bangladesh. As a SAHR bureau member, Sultana has been serving well supporting the efforts of giving voice to the people of Bangladesh and advocating for common issues at national and regional level.

On behalf of the members of South Asians for Human Rights

Hina Jilani

Chairperson

Dr. Nimalka Fernando

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June 7 2017

* <https://www.southasianrights.org/?p=10447>

Amnesty international defend Sultana Kamal

London: Prominent human rights defender Sultana Kamal has received threats of violence from the Islamist group Hefazat-e-Islam, following comments she made on a TV talk show. The authorities must take immediate steps to ensure Sultana Kamal's protection, investigate the threats made against her and hold those responsible to account.

Sultana Kamal is a lawyer and prominent human rights activist in Bangladesh who used to serve as the Executive Director of the human rights NGO, Ain O Salish Kendra. Since 2 June, she has received numerous threats of violence from supporters of the Islamist group Hefazat-e-Islam. The threats against her relate to a recent controversy around the removal of a statue of the Lady of Justice outside the Supreme Court in Dhaka on 26 May 2017. Although the government claims that the removal was a decision made by the Court, and not the government, critics say that it was a move by the government to win favour with conservative Islamist groups. Such groups have for months campaigned for the statue to be taken down, arguing that it is an "idol" and anti-Islamic.

On 28 May, Sultana Kamal appeared on a debate show, on private TV channel News 24, together with Mufti Shakhawat Hossain, a member of Hefazat. During the debate, Mufti Shakhawat Hossain argued that the statue was a religious structure and that no religious structures should be on the Supreme Court's premises. Sultana Kamal responded hypothetically that if that was the case, then logically "no mosques should be on the premises either". There was no adverse reaction from Mufti Shakhawat Hossain to her comments on the programme or over the next few days. However, on 2 June, during Friday Prayer at the country's largest mosque Baitul Mukarram in Dhaka, her comments were distorted. The Hefazat Vice President Junayed Al-Habib said, 'How dare Sultana Kamal! She said that if the statue is not in the country then mosques should not be in the country. If you [Sultana Kamal] come out to the streets, we will break every bone in your body.' Hefazat also demanded that she be arrested within 24 hours or forced to leave the country. Numerous YouTube videos have been posted by Hefazat supporters since 2 June threatening or inciting violence against her.

On 6 June, police in Dhaka announced that they had taken unspecified measures to provide protection to Sultana Kamal. As far as Amnesty International is aware, however, no senior government official has publicly condemned the threats against her, nor has a police investigation been launched into the threats.

Ansar Ahmed Ullah

Contributing Editor, *Shottobani*

8th June 2017

PEN Bangladesh Centre condemns violent threats and baseless accusation against Sultana Kamal

Sultana Kamal, a prominent lawyer and human rights activist of Bangladesh, has recently received threats from the religious group called Hefazat-e-Islam. In light of the views she shared on a television talk show regarding the removal of the statue of Lady Justice from Bangladesh's Supreme Court premises, Hefazat-e-Islam demanded that Sultana Kamal be arrested or exiled. More importantly, they made threats of physical harm.

As an organisation that firmly believes in the tenets of freedom of speech and expression, we at PEN Bangladesh Centre are deeply troubled by this vehement, unabashed public promise of violence against an important member of the Bangladeshi community.

The Constitution of Bangladesh promises to accommodate people of all creed, caste, and religion. This basic element of the framework of our nation allows not only the coexistence of people of varied beliefs, but also mutual respect for each other's views.

We are a country whose very identity is shaped by its historic fight for linguistic, cultural, and ideological liberty; a country known the world over for establishing the International Mother Language Day. As a people whose very social fabric is woven by the strength of language, we cannot and should not stand by the silencing of that language. We cannot condone the thoughts, ideas and beliefs of our people to be stripped of dignity, to be threatened with violence.

It is a matter of deep concern that a group of people are able to issue a public statement that describes in such cruel detail the violence that a prominent public figure will be subjected to if she steps outside of her house.

PEN Bangladesh Centre condemns this threat against such a vital social and cultural figure.

We are concerned that the common people, not all of whom are able to afford protection, are exposed to greater danger each day that such promises of violence are tolerated on a public platform.

PEN Bangladesh Centre demands the safety not only of Sultana Kamal, but of each and every member of our community who hold the right to their own beliefs, whose voices should not be silenced for fear of being misconstrued, and who should not have to fear for their lives for speaking their minds.

12 June 2017

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<http://www.pen-international.org/centresnews/pen-bangladesh-centre-condemns-violent-threats-and-baseless-accusation-against-sultana-kamal/>

Statement: Conduct a Credible Investigation Into Threats of Violence and Ensure Protection of Sultana Kamal in Bangladesh

Chiang Mai, Thailand

We, several international and regional civil society organisations express deep concern over the violent threats received by Sultana Kamal, a prominent lawyer and women human rights defender in Bangladesh. Sultana received these threats from the radical Islamist group Hefazat-e-Islam (Hefazat), a coalition of teachers and students of quami Madrasas[1], after expressing her opinion on a news channel's talk show.

On 28 May, 2017, news channel News 24 invited Sultana, together with Awami League Parliament Member Apu Ukil, Garonajagaran Mancha Spokesperson Imran H Sarker, and Hefazat representative Mufti Sakhawat Hossain to discuss the removal of the lady justice sculpture from the Supreme Court premises. Hefazat-e-Islam and other radical Islamist grounds had insisted the statue needed to be dismantled on 26 May 2017 arguing that instituting the statue would lead to idol worshipping which is against the tenets of Islam.[2]

During the talk show, the Hefazat leader remarked that the statue was a religious object and as such should not be placed on Supreme Court premises. Sultana responded with hypothetical argument that if no religious structure is permitted, then no mosques should be on the premises either. Based on this statement, Hefazat demanded her arrest within 24 hours. Hefazat Vice President, Junayed Al-Habib, further stated that 'we will break every bone in [her] body.'[3] Triggered by the threat made by Hefazat, Sultana received various other threats, including on social media. One person posted a photo of Sultana which was edited to make it look like she was being hanged.[4]

The Dhaka Metropolitan Police Ramna Division and the Detective Branch said on 5 June 2017 that they were taking joint measures to ensure the safety of Sultana. So far, efforts to ensure her safety are limited to closely monitoring her neighbourhood.

We are concerned by the threats faced by Sultana. Violence has been used numerous times to stifle freedom of expression and the legitimate and peaceful work of human rights defenders in Bangladesh.

We urge the authorities in Bangladesh to:

- Openly and unequivocally condemn Hefazat's statements and threats against Sultana Kamal and other Bangladeshi civil society, as their silence reinforces a culture of impunity which emboldens extremists to act criminally without fear of prosecution, and affirms extremists views that are counter to Bangladesh's Constitution, Penal Code, and commitments to international human rights standards and SDG 16 on Peace, justice and strong institutions.
- Carry out all necessary measures to guarantee the physical and psychosocial security of Sultana, her family members, and her fellow human rights defenders;
- Assure Sultana does not face additional gender-based discrimination or violence stemming from her being a woman human rights defender; and
- Ensure an enabling environment for human rights defenders to carry out their peaceful and

legitimate activities, including expressing their opinion freely, without any fear of reprisals, harassment or intimidation from state and non-state actors.

We remind the Government of Bangladesh, as a citizen of Bangladesh, Sultana Kamal has the constitutional rights to (i) 'enjoy the protection of the law, and to be treated in accordance with law', Article 31 (ii) the 'protection of right to life and personal liberty', Article 32, and (iii) 'the right of every citizen to freedom of speech and expression', Article 39.

Signed:

Asian Forum for Human Rights and Development
Front Line Defenders
Amnesty International
South Asians for Human Rights
Asia Pacific Forum on Women, Law and Development
Association for Progressive Communications
International Service for Human Rights

14 June 2017

[1] Quami Madrasas are privately owned Madrasas which operate without government oversight.

[2]
<https://www.theguardian.com/world/2017/may/26/lady-justice-statue-bangladesh-removed-islamist-objections>

[3] <http://www.dhakatribune.com/bangladesh/nation/2017/06/02/hefazat-arrest-sultana-kamal/>

[4] pic.twitter.com/e36anWEZex

For Further Information Please Contact

Neha Gupta

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<http://apwld.org/statement-conduct-a-credible-investigation-into-threats-of-violence-and-ensure-protection-of-sultana-kamal-in-bangladesh/>

'Nab those who threaten Sultana Kamal'

The general secretary of Samajtantrik Mohila Forum Engineer Shampa Basu said the violence against women and children should be stopped, arrested those who threatened Sultana Kamal and the justice of Kalpana Chakma killing and Langudu attacks ensured.

Shampa Basu said these in a rally before bringing out a procession by Samajtantrik Mohila Forum in front of National Press Club yesterday. The speakers said an 8-year girl was raped by two guards of a house in Badda area of the capital city few days back after inviting her at the iftar. Sukhia Rabidas was beaten to death after rape in Habiganj. Women of tribal communities have become the victims of sexual assaults.

Though there are racial identities, all are women. None are being spared. From 3-year old minor girl to 60-year old elderly woman are being victims of sexual violence. Hefazat-e-Islam distorted the statements of Human Rights activist and women's leader Sultana Kamal and threatened her.

But the government is silent. By this, the government is patronizing the rise of the fundamental group that is against the spirit of the Liberation War. The demanded the immediate arrest of those who threatened Sultana Kamal.

The presidium member of Samajtantrik Mohila Forum Shamsunnahar Jotsna, central leader Shipra Mandal, Chhatra Front leader Mukta Baroi and Sushmita Mariam and others were present in the program moderated by Samajtantrik Mohila Forum leader Rukhsana Afroz Asha.

Correspondent

17 June 2017

* <http://dailyasianage.com/news/68491/nab-those-who-threaten-sultana-kamal>

Bangladesh

Sultana Kamal - A Voice for Equality

Even though equal rights are guaranteed by the constitution of 1972, the imbalance of power between the sexes takes "the worst possible form" in Bangladesh, according to Sultan Kamal, human rights lawyer. Annette Hartmetz reports

When Sultana Kamal speaks in front of 50 people, she does not need a microphone. "I have the loud voice of an activist," she says with a laugh. The 55-year-old lawyer is one of the most prominent human rights lawyers in Bangladesh today.

As the daughter of Sufia Kamal, national poet and pioneer of the country's women's movement, and a writer who is also active in the movement "Freedom of the Spirit", she grew up with two sisters and three brothers in an atmosphere of tolerance, freedom and respect. This has had a great influence on her path in life, according to Sultana Kamal.

In the late sixties Sultana Kamal studied law in Dhaka Jura and completed a course of research studies at the "Institute of Social Studies" in the Netherlands. Since 2001 Sultana Kamal has served as the chair of the NGO "Ain o Salish Kendra", founded in 1986. The 130 employees of this legal and mediation center, including 82 women, assist victims of domestic, public and state violence.

Women Living under Muslim Law

They offer legal advice and trainings, do publicity and presswork and are very successful at conveying the importance of human rights through such mediums as plays. Among other things, Sultana Kamal is a member of an organization of women lawyers in Bangladesh and the international network "Women Living under Muslim Law".

Those working to enforce human rights in Bangladesh are inevitably confronted with severe human rights violations that victimize women. Even though equal rights are guaranteed by the constitution of 1972, the imbalance of power between the sexes takes "the worst possible form" in Bangladesh, according to Sultan Kamal.

An especially chilling example of domestic violence is acid attacks, which are more frequent in Bangladesh than anywhere else in the world. According to a hospital study in Dhaka, nearly 3 out of 4 victims are women, with an average age of only 21 years.

The danger of refusing sexual advances

When women refuse sexual advances or marriage proposals, for example, they may fall victim to this extreme kind of attack in which acid is thrown on them, usually concentrated sulfuric acid of the kind used in car batteries.

The acid eats the skin down to the bones, and a woman's chances of living a normal life after such an attack are virtually nil.

The first known acid attack in Bangladesh took place in 1967, and the number of attacks has been rising constantly since the mid-1990s. In the first six months of this year alone "Ain o Salish Kendra" learned of 159 acid attacks, but the number of unreported cases is certain to be higher.

Not even ten percent of these cases go to court, while less than one percent of the perpetrators are sentenced, according to Ms Kamal. As is the case in many countries, the lack of punishment contributes crucially to continuing violence against women.

The tolerance policy of the authorities

The state authorities display no political will to change whatsoever. Today Sultana Kamal goes so far as to speak of a process of "disempowering" woman, in other words, an intentional effort to undermine their rights.

"Ain o Salish Kendra" and its employees are under constant surveillance by the intelligence service. The organization must report on all the details of who visits it and what topics it is working on.

Since October 2001 Bangladesh has been ruled by the Islamist "Jamaat-e-Islami" and the conservative "Bangladesh National Party" (BNP). This has made work harder for many human rights organizations and activists. The NGOs that are supposedly or actually critical of the government are restricted in their activities, while the Islamist NGOs are supported.

The entire society is dominated by insecurity and fear, says Sultana Kamal, and never have so many friends warned her to watch what she says when she travels abroad. However, due to her prominence Sultana Kamal enjoys a certain degree of protection: "The authorities would think twice before arresting me."

Concern about growing influence of fundamentalists

She is extremely concerned about the growing influence of Islamic fundamentalists, noting that negative effects on society, especially on the status of women, can already be seen and that state television is now completely controlled by the fundamentalists. Between programs long ads are repeatedly shown exhorting women to behave in compliance with Islamic norms.

This means wearing the burkha, avoiding contact with men, leaving the house as little as possible and pursuing typically "feminine" activities. If women follow these rules, the ads suggests, they will live in safety.

Despite all these obstacles, the women's movement in Bangladesh is still quite vital and active. "Sometimes", says Sultana Kamal, "I feel that in our country the women are almost the only ones

fighting social inequality and political oppression.”

Perhaps this is because they have less to lose than the men. And she points out one positive effect of state oppression: at least it makes the NGOs cooperate better.

Annette Hartmetz

26 nov. 2004

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* <https://en.qantara.de/content/bangladesh-sultana-kamal-a-voice-for-equality>

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Website of the human rights resource centre Ain o Salish Kendra (ASK) in Bangladesh

Website of the international solidarity network Women Living Under Muslim Laws (WLUML)
