

Speech for women's forum

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I would like to express my heartfelt gratitude for having been invited to the first International Conference by Women's Forum. Today I would tell you a little bit about my life.

I was born in 1962 to a Muslim family in a small town called Mymensingh in what then was East Pakistan. Now, after it gained its independence in 1971, the country is called Bangladesh

Bangladesh, where I was born, is a nation of more than 140 million people, one of the most populous countries in the world. It is a country where 70 per cent of the people live below the poverty line, where more than half the population cannot read and write, a country where there is insufficient health care, and where infant mortality is high. Nearly 40 million women have no access to education nor do they have the possibility of becoming independent.

In my country, my childhood was not much different from that of other girls of my generation. Like other girls of a middle-

class family, I was sent to a school. Girls frequently dropped out of school when they were fifteen or sixteen, ages at which they often were given into marriage by their parents. Few girls had a chance to continue their studies, for after an arranged marriage they were not allowed to continue studying in school or college or university nor could they take a job. They became totally dependent upon their husbands, in other words.

It was usual for us children, in the early morning, to read the Koran in Arabic, and like all other children in Bangladesh I did this. But I found myself asking questions. I wanted to know what I was reading, what the meaning of the Koranic verses was. Our language is Bengali, not Arabic, and it was impossible to know the meaning of the verses that we read. We just read, that's all. When I asked Mother to tell me the meaning of what I was reading, she explained that the meaning is not important, that what is important is that Allah will be happy that I am reading the Koran in its original language.

When I was thirteen or fourteen, however, I found a book that translated the Koran into Bengali. To my surprise, I found

Allah saying that men are superior, that women are inferior. Men can have four wives. Men can divorce their wives any time they want. Men are allowed to beat women.

I found that Islam does not consider woman a separate human being. Man was the original creation and womankind was created secondarily for the pleasure of man. Islam consider a woman as a slave or sexual object, nothing more. Women's role is to stay at home and to obey her husband, for this is her religious duty. Women are considered weak, so they should be taken care of, their body and mind, their desire and wishes, their rights and freedom must be controlled by men. Islam treats women intellectually, morally and physically inferior. In marriage, Islam protects the rights of men and men only. Once the marriage is consummated, women have no rights whatsoever in this field. The Koran gave total freedom to men saying ' *Your women are as your field, go unto them as you will (2.223)*'

Women are told to run to their husbands wherever they are, whatever they do. It is their duty. The hadith says that two

prayers that never reach the heavens are 1. those of the escaping slaves and 2. those of the reluctant women who frustrate their husbands at night.

Islam considers women psychologically inferior. Women's testimony is not allowed in cases of marriage, divorce, and hudud. Hudud are the punishment of Islamic law for adultery, fornication, adultery against a married person, apostasy, theft, robbery, and so forth. If any woman is raped, she has to produce four male witnesses to the court. If she cannot, there is no charge against the rapist. In Islamic law, the testimony of two women is worth that of one man. In the case in which a man suspects his wife of adultery or denies the legitimacy of the offspring, his testimony is worth that of four witnesses. A woman does not have the right to charge her husband in a similar manner.

Women are not allowed to inherit the property equally with their brothers. In the case of inheritance, Allah says, *a male shall inherit twice as much as a female(4.11-12)*

And after all the rights and freedom, after getting all the sexual pleasure and pleasure of being the master, Allah will reward the men with wine, food, and seventy two virgins in Paradise, including their wives of the earth. And what is the reward for the pious woman? Nothing. Nothing but the same old husband, the same man who caused her suffering while they were on earth. It became clear to me that Men had written the Koran for their own interest, for their own comfort, for their own fun. So I stopped believing in Islam. When I studied other religions, I found they, too, oppressed women.

My father, a physician, had a scientific outlook but was very domineering. He did not allow me the freedom to play, to go outside whenever I want, to meet friends, to go to the cinema or theatre, or to read any book that was not in a syllabus. He wanted me to earn a medical degree so he could say that one of his children followed his path. On the one hand, he wanted me to be independent, but on the other hand he wanted to find a good match for me inasmuch as educated men often desire an educated wife.

As I grew up, I kept observing the condition of women in our society. My mother, for example, was a perfect example of a woman oppressed. She had been given into marriage when she was a child, she was a good student in school, but she was not allowed to continue her studies. My grandfather and my father did not want her to study, for what they wanted was for her to be a good housewife, a good mother, a good caretaker.

In our house, I grew up with much fear, having to keep inside my heart all my desire for freedom and curiosity for the outside world. Growing up, I naturally had the belief that girls surely must be inferior to boys, for boys could play in a big field whereas girls had to play with their dolls in a corner of the house. My brothers could go anywhere they wanted, could watch any games, could play anything they wanted to play. I could not. My sister could not. I was told that girls were not made for such, that their role was to stay home, learn how to cook, make beds, clean the house. My mother was not the only woman who was oppressed, for I saw my aunts, my neighbors, and other acquaintances who were playing the same roles, that of being oppressed. In our minds, torture of women is not

oppression, but, rather, is tradition. We become accustomed to tradition. As I grew, I realized that I was a part of the tradition but also that I was being oppressed the same as other women. I realize that whether women are poor or rich, beautiful or ugly, have blue or black or brown eyes, have white, black or brown skin, are unmarried or married, illiterate or literate, believer or non-believer, coward or courageous, all are oppressed. Everywhere women are oppressed. And all because of male-devised patriarchy, religion, tradition, culture, and customs.

Because of my country's strong patriarchal tradition, supported by religious law, women suffer unbearable inequalities and injustices. They suffer from malnutrition and from anaemia as well as from the physical and psychological problems that are not treated. Women normally remain untreated because they are not taken to hospitals until they reach terminal stages. Women are not supposed to become sick, because they must remain busy with household chores, bear and rear children, take care of the family, and make sure that the male members of the family are happy. Women, therefore, are condemned to a lifetime of servitude.

For a married couple, the most unwanted thing is a female baby. If a female baby is born, it is not uncommon that either the wife gets a divorce for her crime of having given birth to a female or the wife must spend her life in disgrace. A woman's destiny is to be ruled by the father in childhood, by the husband when she is young, and by her son when she is old.

Now, far too many women suffer from trafficking, from slavery, from all kinds of discrimination. Men throw acid on their bodies, burn their faces, smash their noses, melt their eyes, and walk away as happy men. Women are beaten, are flogged, and are stoned to death. Women are raped, are accused of having allowed the rape, and the rapists are set free. Violence against women is not considered a crime in my country.

For example, let me tell you about Yasmin, a 15-year-old girl. Employed as a maid, she was raped by her master, she fled from the master's home, and she was observed by the police as she walked toward her parents' house. The police told her it was not safe for a girl to be walking on the road at night; they offered her a ride home in their van, and what happened? Six policemen raped her, killed her and then threw her body into the bushes.

When news of her murder broke out, villagers demonstrated against the police. The police shot at the protesters, killed seven. The government then issued a statement the following day that Yasmin was a girl of bad character, she was a prostitute, and the police had every right to treat her as they did. Such is not a rarity in Bangladesh. I know that it happens in other countries, also.

Nobody told me to protest, but from an early age I developed strong feelings about the importance of fighting against oppression. Nobody asked me to shed a tear, but I did. Nobody suggested that I could help bring about any changes, but by writing books I wanted to do something constructive. I wrote about the need for women to understand why they are oppressed and why they should fight against their oppression. For centuries, women have been taught that they are slaves of men, that they are not supposed to protest against the patriarchal system, that they must remain silent against their abusers. As a result, it has been difficult for women to accept the idea that they are, in fact, human beings and have the right to live as independent and equal human beings. Through my

writing, I tried to encourage women to fight for their rights and freedom. My voice gave women the chance to think differently. That did not make the religious fundamentalists and male chauvinists happy. They refused to tolerate any of my views. They objected to a woman's breaking the chains and becoming free. They could not tolerate my saying that *the religious scriptures are out of time and out of place*. They were angry at my saying that *religious law, which discriminates against women, needs to be replaced by secular law with a uniform civil code*. Before long, hundreds of thousands of extremists appeared on the streets and demanded my execution by hanging. A fatwa was issued against me, setting a price on my head. The Government, instead of taking action against the fundamentalists, took action against me. The Government filed a case against me on the charges of blasphemy. An arrest warrant was issued. I had no other alternative but to go into hiding. After a bail was granted, I was forced to leave my country. Since then, I have been trying to go back to my country, but it is impossible. I am not allowed to return to my country. But despite all the pressure, I continued writing. In my poetry, prose, essays, and

novels, I have defended the people who are oppressed. I have cried loudly for equality and justice, justice for all people whatever their religion and gender. I have spoken loudly for the separation of religion and state, for secular law, for secular education.

During my struggle for a secular and ethical humanism, I have tried to defend the poor and also the ethnic and religious minority communities that were being oppressed. It was impossible for me to accept the idea that people living miserable lives did so because they had a different faith, or spoke a different language, or had a different culture. I believe that *the diversity of our world's many languages, cultures and ethnicities is not a pretext for conflict, but is a treasure that enriches us all*, Diversity is a treasure to be appreciated. There is no superior, no inferior, culture in this world, only various cultural patterns that make up our beautiful multicoloured mosaic. But, humans should not allow oppression in the name of religion or culture. Humans should not allow torture such as female genital mutilation. Humans should not allow barbarism, humiliation, inequality, or injustice in the name of culture.

Culture should not be and must not be used against humanity.

Because of blind faith In religion, humans are suffering bloodshed, hatred, ignorance, illiteracy, injustices, and poverty. But if we on Earth sincerely wanted to replace injustice with justice, we could eliminate all the problems of humanity, which are caused by a blind faith in religion. Both the Judeo-Christian Bible and the Koran clearly accept and condone slavery. Jesus explicitly tells slaves to accept their roles and obey their masters. No one in this world today would defend chattel slavery in any public forum or allow it under any legal code. Neither fundamentalist Christians nor Orthodox Jews talk about animal sacrifice or slavery. In those countries in which sharia or Islamic law exists, where stoning for adultery and amputation for stealing are legalized, no legitimization of slavery is ever mentioned. Polygamy and use of concubines are clearly accepted in the Old Testament, but nowhere in the Judeo-Christian world are either of these practices legalized. Thus, insistence upon continuing those practices that denigrate, oppress, and suppress women under the guise of scriptural reference is a sham. Such practices could and should be de-

legitimized just as chattel slavery has been de-legitimized.

I have been writing against all kind of physical and sexual violence, religious terrorism, and patriarchal discrimination against women. Meanwhile, I do have a dream: I dream of a beautiful world, where no woman will be oppressed, will not be a victim of trafficking, acid throwing, rape, and sexual assault. I dream of a world where human beings will respect each other, a respect that would not give way to war, bloodshed, or violence. I have been writing to make my dream come true, an ethical world in which humanity will flourish with humans full of love, not with humans full of hatred.

My pen is my weapon in such a fight for a secular humanism, but the religionists have come to kill me with their swords. They have burned my books, sued my publishers for publishing my books and attacked the bookshops where my books are kept. My freedom of expression has constantly been violated by governmental authority. I have written twenty eight books, 5 of which are banned by the Government of Bangladesh – additional cases have been filed against me to ban my other

books. One Bangladesh court sentenced me to one year in prison for what I have written. In recent years, the Government banned all four books of my autobiographical memoirs.

In my memoir, what I have written is not just my life story. It is the same story that thousands of women know about, how women live in a patriarchal society that has hundreds of traditions that allow them to suffer. I have looked back into my childhood days and described the life of being a female child. I have told how I was brought up and have explained that I had privileges that many others did not have. I was able to study and become a medical doctor, something that thousands of girls cannot even dream about. I wanted to show where and how I grew up and what made me think differently, what made me do things differently. It is important to give other women some inspiration to revolt against the oppressive system that I grew up under and which still continues for them. I told the truth. I expressed everything that happened in my life. Normally it is taboo to reveal rape or attempted rape by male members of one's family. Girls shut their mouth, because they are terribly ashamed. But I did not shut my mouth. I did not care what

people would say to me or to my family. I know well that many women feel that I am telling their untold stories, too. We, the victims, should shout loudly. We need to be heard. We must protest loudly and demand our freedom and rights. We must refuse to be shackled, chained, beaten, and threatened.

If women do not fight to stop being oppressed by a shameful patriarchal and oppressive religious system, then shame on women! Shame on us for not protesting, for not fighting, for allowing a system to continue that will affect our children as well as our children's children.

My story is not a unique one. My experiences, unfortunately, have been shared by millions of fellow sufferers. In my books, I cried for myself. I also cried for all the others who have not been able to enjoy the productive life of which they are capable and which they most assuredly deserve. We who are women no longer must remain solitary, crying softly in lonely places. I do not cry alone anymore, and because of that I have been suffering. I was thrown out of my own country. Instead of being able to live in the area of the world in which I was born and brought up, I was given the alternative of living in the west

where I am forced to feel like an outsider.

I am, in other words, a stranger in my own country and a stranger here in the west where I now am living. Where can I go? Nowhere. Exile, for me, is a bus stop, one where I am waiting for a bus to go home. Well, now I have been waiting in exile for more than 10 years. Still, I do not feel that any home is my home, any country my country. Mine is a hopeless, helpless feeling. Sometimes I ask myself, is this true, do I really have no home? One part of me says yes. Another, however, says it's not true. I do have a home. My home is love, the love I receive from women all over the world. That is my home, the love I receive from rationalists, free thinkers, secularists, and humanists is my home. The love I receive from you, that is my home.

I regret nothing that I have done or for what I have ever written. Come what may, I will continue my fight against all the extremist, fundamentalist, intolerant forces without any compromise until my death.

Today women gathered here to talk about power in the economy and society. Today, I know, many women are being beaten, raped, and murdered as I speak. Today, I know, many

girls are being abused. Today, I know, many women died because of not having food or drinking water or the treatment for their diseases. The challenge is to educate the world's peoples about women's rights as human rights. Not only 8th of March, not only one day In 365 days, the challenge is to make every day of the year a women's day.

I am delighted to be able to speak in Women's Forum. I love to see that Women are united, nothing is better than this. If women get united, all the problems of inequalities and injustices against women will be solved. if women are united, it would be easy for them to get the political, societal and economical power.

I am grateful for the sympathy, support, and solidarity that Women's Forum has shown to me. This support has made me all the more committed and all the more determined to continue my struggle. Thank you all. Merci beaucoup.