

Women's Day

The annual observance of International Women's Day on March 8 may have all the elements of ritualistic celebration, but the day's significance in the socio-economic and political context of Bangladesh can hardly be over-estimated. Although nearly half the population of the country are women, their socio-economic status remains far below that of men, while their political representation is woefully inadequate. This low status means women are subject to various forms of violence, both at home and in society at large, without adequate protection of the law. But at the root of it all lies the low value placed on women's lives and abilities at the family level. In other words, women suffer all types of discrimination from the time of birth, through the period of their growth and for the duration of their adult lives.

Against this backdrop, mere talk of enactment of laws to address issues of gender equality are bound to raise a few sceptical eyebrows. Laws alone cannot have much effect because discrimination is inbred in the political-economic system and in social norms. Not surprisingly, speakers at a roundtable on gender equality organised by this paper on Saturday called for a change in the mindset of policy-makers, particularly politicians and bureaucrats, in order to place women's issues at the top of the national agenda. Two institutions of critical importance - the political establishment and the civil administration - that generate policy options, allocate funds and implement policies, remain heavily biased towards male priorities. The view that these institutions require drastic reforms, through positive discrimination in favour of women and women's priorities, clearly holds a great deal of water.

In order to effect institutional reforms in the political establishment and the bureaucracy, one option is to increase the numbers, by raising women's representation in parliament and expanding the quota system in the bureaucracy to include appointments to higher up the ladder. As far as parliament is concerned, the time has also come to consider direct elections to seats reserved for women. But even then, the question of attitude would remain unresolved, because this cannot be changed through laws. Therefore, a continuous social campaign needs to be launched to persuade political parties to address gender equality as a core issue in their agenda. Only then can women's issues find their rightful place in the national agenda.