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Point Counterpoint

The price women leaders pay

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IS the global media completely oblivious to the gendered semantics of the recent Bangladeshi political events? News article after news article, from one country's press to the other, is repeating titles such as "battling begums," "feuding begums," and "battered begums." For brevity, I will keep this list short. But start with the Economist articles such as *Politics in Bangladesh: The begums are back* (September 20), *One Begum down* (March 10, 2007), *Battered Begums* (April 14, 2007).



A little respect, please! Photo: Munem Wasif/ Drik News

Then glance at the other headlines, such as AFP: *Bangladesh government wants feuding "begums" to meet* (September 15), Arab News: *Dhaka seeks talks between "Battling Begums"* (September 14), The Daily Times: *Battling Begums* (September 11), *Bangladesh's "Battling Begums" rule the roost again*, Reuters India (September 25), The Australian: *Close Up- Battle of the Begums* (April 28, 2007). Bangladeshi newspapers have their own share of gendered language. Look at S.I. Zaman's piece in The Daily Star on October 8.

Do not get me wrong. I am all for political satire and ridiculing, and enjoy the most recent addition to these, i.e. Tina Fey's impersonation of Sarah Palin. This kind of ridiculing has a subversive element to it, and is used in witty/innovative ways even in many non-democratic and authoritarian states.

However, ridiculing Sheikh Hasina and Khaleda Zia as begums does not highlight their political failings but rather their gender.

At a time when women's rights and voices are celebrated and thought to be integrated in the political and social lives of both Western and non-Western states, such headlines make me wonder how far we have come in reality?

In contrast to the "hard and stern" Hillary Clinton and Madeline Albright and the "iron lady" image of Margaret Thatcher, the winking Sarah Palin, glorified as a sex object in the recent US election campaign, perhaps appeals to some women and men.

On the other hand, when we read about battling or battered "begums" of Bangladesh, a poverty stricken largely Muslim nation, one could very well imagine Sheikh Hasina Wajed and Begum Khaleda Zia involved in scuffle, tearing each others' hair, and glaring at each other.

As "begums," both are portrayed as emotive women controlled by hormonal changes, who refuse to talk to each other; women who are not experienced in running the state, and should go back to the kitchen!

Women everywhere in the world have to go one step further to prove that they are equally excellent for carrying out a job. Muslim women have additional burdens. They have to prove their worth as women, as Muslim women, and as Muslim non-Western/brown women.

The global media vividly depict how four wives of one man fight each other for his attention in Afghanistan (for example, *Hot Docs: Four Wives, One Man*, SBS Australia, September 29) and how women suffer the worst fate of honour killings by their relatives in Pakistan (The Guardian,

September 1).

These bring attention to violence against women in the name of culture, religion and traditions, raise public awareness, and highlight that women's concerns must be urgently addressed.

However, if not understood sufficiently and in context, there is a danger of stereotyped assumption that Muslim women are weak and powerless; women who fight with each other within their private space because they are terrified of the men who rule the public domain.

In a paradoxical manner, Muslim nations have seen important women leaders emerge. Critics would point out that for most of them, family connections were the key to their leadership functions. I will come back to this point later.

The origin of the word "begum" is Turkish (Begüm), meaning princess or a woman of high rank. Although, in the Indian subcontinent, begum is used as a title of Muslim women of higher rank, it is not uncommon for many other Muslim women to have begum as a title or even a name.

However, the way these articles apply the word "begum" implicitly derides not Sheikh Hasina's and Khaleda Zia's politics but their gender. This is what I object to.

Both have been blamed for contributing to Bangladesh's dark political reality and rightly so, as the leaders were responsible for the domestic instability in Bangladesh. Both came into power through the web of familial connections, which is common not only in politics but virtually in every significant aspect of economic and social stratifications in South Asia.

It is not their gender but their political histories that form the basis of the politics of antagonism between Sheikh Hasina and Khaleda Zia.

It is not their gender, but their family connections that provided them with the opportunity to be involved in politics. Sheikh Hasina and Khaleda Zia's ascendancy into politics because of family background is not that uncommon in global politics.

The Clintons or the Kennedys, the Senanayakes and the Bandaranaiques in Sri Lanka, Nehru-Gandhis in India, and Bhuttos in Pakistan are some examples of dynastic succession. Benazir Bhutto's autobiography, *Daughter of Destiny*, perhaps best portrays what family connections mean in South Asia.

Children and spouses of political leaders believe they have "moral authority" and are destined to be leaders as well. In many ways, public opinion/support also contributes to this belief of hereditary leadership. If a political leader is assassinated, often another family member bears the responsibility of completing the unfinished task of leading the people or the state.

The most recent example of this is Asif Ali Zardari and his young son Bilawal Bhutto Zardari, who are jointly leading PPP till Bilawal becomes an adult. Zardari, who used to be called "Mr. Ten Percent," is now the president of Pakistan. He bears an uncanny resemblance to Tariq Rahman in Bangladesh. Or is it my imagination?

With the exception of Indira Gandhi, none of the other political leaders, who appeared on the public stage through family influence in South Asia have been suitably mentored to be leaders. Massive public sympathy following political assassinations and strategic choices of the other leaders in their political parties have landed most of them in leadership roles.

This is something we really need to consider. Political maneuvers in relation to important leadership decisions surrounding the prime ministers and presidents of South Asia are often overlooked. The ridiculing of women in leadership roles does not do women or men any favours.

Sexism and discriminatory practices against women do not stop by allowing women to vote, participate in elections, and voice their opinions.

Men and women journalists, academics and practitioners all have a responsibility to consciously use gender sensitive language, as their outputs have significant impact in shaping norms and practices. Also, ridiculing Sheikh Hasina and Khaleda Zia as "begums" does not necessarily translate into pointing out their failure as leaders.

In a twisted way, familial connection has served as an opportunity to access political power for

both men and women in Bangladesh. Family connections are important, not only in politics but in every aspect of economic and social life here. Who knows whom, and who is connected to who often determine who gets where. It is important to consider reforms in the society that will allow someone without any connection to show her or his potential.

However, ethnic and religious minorities, people living in rural or remote areas, children who do not attend English schools or the best Bangla schools, must be given opportunities that allow them to have access equally.

Neither AL nor BNP regimes have consciously improved the condition of marginalised people in Bangladesh. Benefits have trickled down in the name of the poor, but they have never actually been the primary beneficiaries.

Women in politics are often viewed as weak actors; Sheikh Hasina and Khaleda Zia were no exceptions. The leaders and cronies surrounding them manipulated their naiveté in the earlier days of their role in politics.

Over time, both had perhaps become savvy in terms of Bangladesh's political culture, and both AL and BNP led regimes had made choices that plunged Bangladesh into various political crises. However, it is not their gender that is to be blamed for these recent crises.

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