

Radcliffe Day Symposium 2008



"What Are the Challenges, Risks, and Obligations for Women in 2008 and Beyond?" Prepared Remarks by Rounaq Jahan '68, PhD '70

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Photo by Tony Rinaldo

Rounaq Jahan's biography

I am deeply honored to receive the Graduate Society Award from the Radcliffe Institute for Advanced Study. My memories of Harvard as a graduate student living in the all-women dormitory at 6 Ash Street, the Cronkite Graduate Center, from 1965 to 1969 are full of joy, exhilaration, and great expectations. It was not easy for me to get adjusted to Harvard or living in the United States. Though I was fluent in reading and writing in English, I had never spoken the language before I came to the US. Further, I was raised in a gender-segregated Muslim society leading a very protected and sheltered life. So there were challenges. However, soon after I arrived, I was given a friendly advice that here you either "sink or swim." Since I had no intention of sinking, I suppose, I quickly learned how to swim. But I think it's not simply the fear of sinking but something more positive that propelled me to swim. I liked and enjoyed the stimulating academic environment of Harvard, class lectures given by the outstanding faculty, and discussions with fellow students. I was completely immersed in a life of books and ideas. For the first time in my life, I was encouraged to speak up and debate in the class and outside. Harvard demanded intellectual rigor and, at the same time, provided a supportive environment for me to achieve that goal of excellence. I owe an immense debt of gratitude to Harvard for my intellectual and personal growth.

The world has changed tremendously and particularly the lives of women have changed significantly since I was a graduate student in the mid-1960s. In the last 40 years, in the United States as well as in countries around the world, gender gaps in education, employment, income, decision making, and even in political leadership have been narrowed. In many countries, including the US, women now outnumber men in schools and colleges. They have a significant presence in many fields; e.g., science, medicine, business, and law, which in the 1960s used to be heavily dominated by men. Women's labor-force participation has also become near equal. Marriage and family patterns have changed enabling women to have greater voice within the household, which had traditionally been a major site of women's exploitation. We have traveled far but we still face many challenges, some old and some new.

So what are the challenges? I will focus on four which are old, but they still continue to challenge women. Our first challenge is to shape our own identity, to be our own person and not be defined by others. This is not always easy, as our families and societies are constantly telling us who we

should be. But from my own experiences, I know that when we stand firm on what we want to be, we can break many barriers. When I began my academic-activist life in my country Bangladesh in the early 1970s, I used to stand out as a young, single woman pursuing a path very different from other women. What I find remarkable is how quickly our society changed. Change happened because I was not alone; many other women also decided to fulfill their own potentials.

Of course, we have to recognize that achieving our own personal goals cannot be our only challenge. We need to confront the challenges that condition the lives of the vast majority of the world's women. We need to focus specifically on areas where progress for women has been relatively slow in the last 30, 40 years. Our second challenge is then to improve the terms and conditions of women's work, both paid and unpaid. We all know that women's employment rates have increased significantly in the last 40 years, but women's share of earned income has not been at par with their employment. For example, at present in the US, women constitute nearly half (46 percent) of the labor force, but their share of earned income is about two-thirds that of men's. It is even lower in India, which is less than one-third. A part of the problem is that the conditions of poverty have pushed women to take any employment, no matter how poor the terms and conditions. This has resulted in women being predominantly concentrated in low-paid, insecure, casual jobs. For example, in Bangladesh, men dominated manufacturing jobs in the 1970s. Now the situation has reversed where young women make up a majority of the industrial workforce. Further, 80 percent to 90 percent of the workers of the garment industry are young women. This industry, which constitutes Bangladesh's main exports, annually earns 9 billion dollars, whereas these women workers earn less than a dollar a day while putting in 12–14 hours. However, Bangladesh is not unique. The economic boom of many countries is dependent on women's cheap labor. Additionally, the burden of unpaid work in the care economy (i.e., child care, care of the sick and elderly family members) continues to be a problem for women as they expand their participation in paid employment. Getting governments and the private sector to recognize women's contribution to economic growth, their poor work conditions, and their labor in the care economy remains a major challenge for women in the future.

Our third challenge is to reduce violence against women. We have succeeded in making violence against women, particularly domestic violence, a criminal offense in many countries. But this has not resulted in any significant reduction on the incidence of violence. Even in a country such as Sweden, which generally ranks number one in the global women's empowerment index, police reports of assaults on women have increased by 40 percent during the 1990s (from 14,000 in 1990 to 22,400 in 2003). What is worse, war and political and ethnic conflicts have routinely embraced violence against women as a part of their arsenal. In recent years we have witnessed rape being used as a weapon in war and conflict situations in Asia, Africa, as well as Europe.

Our final challenge, and here we have near stagnation, is to improve women's presence in political leadership positions. With the exception of Nordic countries, where women have made significant progress; in the rest of the world progress has been extremely slow. For example, in Sweden, women constitute 47 percent of parliament and 52 percent of ministerial level positions. In contrast, in the USA, women hold 16 percent of Congressional seats and 14 percent of ministerial positions. In India, which has been a model for a long-standing stable democracy among the Southern countries, the progress of women is even slower, though a woman prime minister has governed India for more than a decade (1966–1977; 1980–1984). In India, women's share of parliamentary seats is 9 percent and ministerial positions are 3 percent.

However we cannot effectively address these challenges without recognizing the emerging threats/risks for women's empowerment. I will now turn to the risks for women. I will be selective and focus on four major risks. The first risk is the global trend of cutting back on the role of government and the public sector and relying more and more on the market and the private sector; which can adversely affect women's—and particularly poor women's—health and education. From our past experiences, we know that government laws and policies have played a critical role in improving women's conditions. Nordic women are doing better compared to women of other regions mainly because Nordic governments have been proactive. Their equality laws, women-friendly social policies, 40/60 principle of political representation, and public sector provisioning of health

and education have contributed significantly in pushing Nordic countries to the top of the women's empowerment index.

The second risk for women is the persistent and alarmingly widening inequalities between different groups of women, which has held back our overall progress and created obstacles in building a strong and cohesive political voice. The gains women have made in the last 40–50 years have not been equitably shared. Class, race, place of residence have been major markers of disparities. Let me give a few examples of these disparities: Lifetime chances of dying from maternal deaths are 1 in 2,500 in USA and Europe, 1 in 94 in Asia, and 1 in 16 in sub-Saharan Africa. However, there are not only North-South disparities, but also great disparities within countries. In India, less than half (43 percent) of births are attended by skilled personnel, compared to near universal attendance (99 percent) in USA. But disparities within India are greater than that between India and USA. Only 16 percent of the poorest families compared to 84 percent of the richest families in India have skilled birth attendance. Within USA also, black women (7.5 percent) have double the rate of unemployment compared to white women (4 percent). If we want to sustain our progress, we need to work towards reducing these disparities.

The third and related risk for women is the narrow constituency base of the women's movements. Women's movements around the world have played a key role in mobilizing women to demand their rights and pressurize governments to enact laws, adopt policies, and take specific actions. But the constituency bases of these movements in most countries have been limited to upper- and middle-class women. Working-class and poor women have generally not been drawn into them. This gap has considerably weakened the capacity of the women's movement to work as a strong unified political force.

The task of widening the constituency base becomes particularly urgent when we consider the fourth risk for women: the backlash from conservative groups, many of whom are religious extremists. These extremists are to be found in all religions: Christianity, Islam, Judaism, and Hinduism. In recent years, the resurgence of political use of religion and the political strength of faith-based groups have directly threatened women's rights. For example, the religious extremists in the USA are not only limiting women's choice in this country; via the gag rule, they are also threatening the reproductive rights of women globally. The secularists who have been in the forefront championing women's rights are in a much weakened position politically in many countries. The global war on terror has further exacerbated the risks for women by legitimizing the political use of religion and religious groups.

Let me finally turn to women's obligations. Again, I will be selective and highlight four. Our first obligation is to ourselves. As I mentioned earlier, we need to always stand up for our own rights, to be constantly vigilant and ever-ready to defend and promote our rights.

Our second obligation is to assist other women who are less privileged and resourced than us in our own countries as well as globally. We may all have our own paid and unpaid work responsibilities. But we still need to volunteer time for civic and political actions that address the issues of inequities and exclusion. I became involved in the women's movement in the 1970s, when I realized that I could no longer be a silent witness to the plight of thousands of women who were raped during our war of national liberation and were socially stigmatized and abandoned by their families.

Our third obligation is to recognize the critical role that education has played in fueling women's progress. This is more crucial for us who had the privilege of receiving an excellent education. Evidence from all over the world indicates that women's education has been good not only for women; it has also led to family well-being and economic growth. But millions of girls and women around the world are still denied access to education, particularly quality education. Girls account for more than half of the 57 million children who are out of school. We and institutions such as Radcliffe and Harvard need to move beyond simple knowledge generation. We have to get involved in quiet initiatives as well as public campaigns to ensure that quality education becomes available to all of the world's citizens.

Finally, we need imagination to create a vision of a society, economy, polity, and world order that will be equal, just, and inclusive; and we need to be in the forefront and provide leadership to a shared struggle of women *and* men to reach that vision. We need stamina and courage, but above all, we need to be committed and have faith in our own strength to transform the world.