

**Educating Bengali Women for Empowerment
In Pre and Post-Modern Time**

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I want to open with a quote from Virginia Wolf that sets the stage for my presentation today.

*As a woman I have no country; as a woman
my country is the whole world.*

Introduction

We all know of women of great vision; women whose efforts and accomplishments have had a major impact. But often we may not understand how they became such powerful agents of change and what sorts of questions we should ask of their pasts to understand how the trajectories of their lives were formed. In this paper I will cast new light on the accomplishments of the Sisters of the Holy Cross as twenty-first century women of vision in Bangladesh, who translated their vision into action to answer the urgent need for profound and positive social change. Moreover, I will illustrate how the Sisters' energy rose from a spiritually motivated vision to a call to action to create breakthroughs in Bangladeshi society. This work will serve as a springboard for the exploration of how the Holy Cross influence impacted individual women's life-course and served as a galvanizing force for many future Bangladeshi women.

Attention will also be given to the global aspects of their vision for bridging gender disparities by increasing educational opportunities and accessibility to all girls and women, regardless of religious background.

You will come to understand how much the Holy Cross heritage of the past in Bangladesh is wedded to the achievements of the present and the vision of the future. I will also illustrate how contemporary Bangladeshi women are and will continue to contribute to the development of the new self of women and the new personality of the nation.

As one examines how economic and cultural globalization are spreading their tentacles throughout Asia, it becomes apparent that the values from Western hegemony are swiftly becoming universalized. Archival documents indicate that this negative aspect of globalization was never embraced by the Sisters of the Holy Cross. In fact, they developed a theological consciousness in solidarity with all peoples that continues to flourish in their educational efforts.

Since the 1930s, Holy Cross education has promoted human development for girls of various faith traditions and ethnic backgrounds that comprise Bangladesh society. The intent of the Sisters to educate women for empowerment may not appear to be prophetic today. However, the holistic educational approach established by the Sisters, with focus on

literacy, health care, nutrition, women's role and rightful place in society, is, in fact, indeed prophetic when placed within the context of its inception, beginning with the inclusion of Hindu teachers.

The Sisters' model of inclusivity from a mutually respectful point of view, generated an inter-religious perspective, counter to the narrow vision which considered the Roman Catholic Church as "containing the fullness of truth," (i.e., the Church as identified with the Kingdom of God). The Sisters' vision pushed it to broader pluralistic horizons where truth is sought in other religions as well, (the Kingdom of God is larger than the Church), thus enabling all to learn from a variety of religious traditions.

This inclusiveness has, as its focus, an inter-religious perspective concerned with the symbols and stories of Hinduism, Islam, Christianity, Buddhism and other indigenous religions. This counter-cultural and counter-religious model paved the way for Holy Cross students and by association, their parents and future children, to develop a respect for all religions. Thus, the Sisters raised consciousness and opened the door to a deepened religious tolerance and acceptance both locally and globally.

By implementing their educational model, the Sisters implicitly called for cultural change addressing issues that are at the base of patriarchal oppression, inequality and poverty. What the Sisters seemed to intuit in the

1950s, global society has now come to accept – without education, Bangladeshi girl-children live in more poverty, contract more diseases, suffer more violence, face more disadvantage than if they had malaria or HIV. Most will never be given a chance. Why? Because they were born female!

How is it that a congregation of Catholic sisters living half way around the world came to a realization far ahead of its time, that education for girls was the key to empowerment, regardless of religion or class? How is it that nearly seventy years later, after globalization, the Beijing Conference, the National Commission for Women, and the evolution of feminism international, conditions for women in many countries continue to deteriorate? I contend that the Sisters' mission of empowerment of Bangladeshi girls (women) ongoing for more than seventy years, prior to a public vocabulary describing "feminism" "globalization" or "post-modern church" suggests they possessed a vision before there was the language to articulate it.

In order to more fully understand the prophetic aspect of the Holy Cross educational mission of empowerment of women in this patriarchal culture, it is important to note that their vision:

- Addressed the paradigm, the thinking, the mentality of the time which was androcentric or patriarchal;

- Attempted to widen horizons, broaden understanding of the need to create an egalitarian, mutually respectful, cosmopolitan, cross-cultural consciousness;
- Included an understanding of the interface and interaction between sexism, racism, caste systems, and violence.
- Revealed an understanding that patriarchy is not just the domination of females by males, but an entire socio-cultural political system of graded subjugation and domination of all women and some men.

By providing this education and accessibility to girls from all segments of society they helped to empower a broad spectrum of Bangladeshi girls to become genuine stakeholders in building a more equal and just social order as well as helping to enhance the development capacity of their country's economy.

Prior to the 1960s, the Catholic Church's message to missionaries was to go to foreign lands to "convert the Pagans."ⁱ From the beginning the Sisters, motivated by justice, rejected this message and were clear that their intent was to "empower women." The overriding goal was to accommodate the hunger for learning which burns within many girls and boys in Bangladesh, however remote this dream may be from the circumstances of their family. The Sisters recognized that education was seen by all strata of Bangladeshi society as the one available avenue for upward mobility.

It is also important to note that as far back as the 1930s, the Sisters knew instinctively that intelligence is not awarded in accordance with gender, income and social status, but is randomly distributed. Education for girls was a slow process and the Sisters went into the villages to persuade parents to allow their girls to attend school.

The original vision of the Sisters to provide educational opportunity to girls was expanded to include extended opportunity for the brightest graduates from these schools to continue their education in an institution of higher learning – Holy Cross College.

Holy Cross High School and College, established in Dhaka in 1950 and 1951, were not merely institutions of learning; they symbolized a defining moment in the quest for Bangladeshi women's empowerment and equality. The expansion of the Holy Cross educational model to include a college for women greatly accelerated the awareness and knowledge of women in ways that transcend the patriarchal influence and pressures of religion, culture and society.

Although there has been a mass undertaking by the Bangladeshi government to educate its people, Bangladesh remains similar to most developing countries in that women's education continues to lag far behind that of men. In spite of this patriarchal domination, the Sisters realized that

the education of girls (women) was a key step towards the improvement of the literacy rate because the graduates would teach their children to read and write. They also knew that education would open the door to opportunity and choice for the poor class and those living in villages.

The schools drew a broad spectrum of students with varied religious backgrounds who stimulated the intellectual diversity and vibrancy that distinguishes our best institutions. Muslim, Hindu, Christian and Buddhist teachers/professors illustrated this same diversity in both the school and college. The Sisters believed that the pursuit of knowledge was not separate from a raised awareness of social mores, religious practices and class distinction. A woman graduate had the following to say:

What Holy Cross did for us was to equip us with the right value system and confidence to face the world. Having a good command of the English language also equipped us to interact with people of different cultures with ease. The value system alone made us conscientious in doing whatever task that lay ahead, and all these qualities helped us become what we are today.ⁱⁱ

The education of Bangladeshi girls was never intended merely as an avenue for independence, but rather as a preparation for future life. Thus, the girls enrolled in Holy Cross schools played an historic role in the liberation of women in the 1950s, 60s and 70s, and were at the vanguard of the struggle for equality.

Remarks from alumnae living in Bangladesh also give witness to how their Holy Cross education changed them. “I learned in college that I could make choices.” “I began to have an awareness and appreciation of Muslim and Hindu celebrations, along with Christian values.” “I came out of my shell. I learned how to mix with other people, all religions and all ages.” ⁱⁱⁱ

Perhaps the most poignant and succinct statement comes from a Muslim alumna who is continuing the vision/mission of the Sisters as a professor at Holy Cross College. “HOLY CROSS, a name or is it just a name? No, it’s not. It is an institution in itself. But for me, it has a deeper and far-reaching implication. For me, the very name is proof of my existence today; a proof that I too have been and will remain a part of this whole universe.” ^{iv}

Holy Cross College was the first Christian women’s college in the country, and remains so today presently enrolling approximately 1,000 students. Many of its graduates – Muslim, Hindu, Buddhist and Christians have gone into service-oriented fields: government, law, medicine, education at all levels, Non Government Organizations (NGOs), foreign and social services as well as other humanitarian endeavors in Bangladesh and around the world. One example is that of Ameerah Haq, a graduate of both Holy Cross School and College. She was a deputy special representative of the

United Nations Secretary General for Afghanistan and was awarded the Malalai medal by President Hamid Karzai on June 11, 2007, in recognition of her services for relief, recovery and reconstruction.^v Her next assignment was with humanitarian aid in Darfur, Sudan.

Following the great Bengal famine of 1943-44, which left thousands of orphans, the Sisters built an orphanage in the village of Tejgaon outside Dhaka. As a continuation of their original mission, they provided an education for the children, and in the early 1950s opened their school to local girls of all faiths.

Holy Cross High School in Dhaka has grown into a comprehensive regional resource that currently serves over 1,500 girls. In the same facility, the Sisters offer an afternoon literacy program for more than 400 street children of the urban capital of Dhaka. Over the years, both institutions have become models for government education programs and private schools throughout the country.

In the 1960s the Sisters, wanting to utilize the skills of the poor, began cooperative programs for women in the slums of Dhaka, as well as in several villages, which pre-dated those of the Grameen Bank (literally “Bank of the Villages” in Bengali), founded in 1983. Today these programs thrive in large rural settings, offering to their diverse communities opportunities for

education, religious formation, vocational training and health care. Within this model, students, parents, teachers, administrators and local and national organizations work together to develop personal and social transformation. The intent is the promotion of women's empowerment by creating greater understanding among religions along with principles of justice and peace throughout this part of Asia.

From this prophetic "mustard seed" has grown the Holy Cross education model that exists today to produce informed, enlightened Bangladeshi women who "Hold the future of the world in their hands."^{vi} However,

*Too many women
in too many countries
speak the same language.
of silence...*

*And yet, there must be freedom –
if we are to speak.
And yes, there must be power –
if we are to be heard.
And when we have both
(freedom and power),
Let us not be misunderstood.^{vii}*

How did the Sisters empower the silenced voices of Bangladeshi girls and women to be heard? How did they employ a model designed to transform an ancient system? In order to conceptualize and implement a

transformative system, the Sisters first had to assess why Bangladeshi women allowed this reality of silence in their lives. They found that it was due, in large part, to ignorance, an oppressive culture and patriarchal religion. In addition to teaching critical thinking and analysis, the Sisters had to move beyond a surface naming of issues, to a process of analysis, critique and societal/theological reconstruction so that the voice of Bangladeshi women would be silent no more.

Perhaps most important, within the context of South Asia, is the knowledge that traditional religion, (i.e., Islam, Hinduism, Buddhism Christianity, etc.), each is practiced differently in almost every culture and even within cultures. This makes the enterprise of defining a religion extremely thorny because it involves defining a set of praxes that are infinitely varied in their exact forms, but are recognized by their practitioners to be “Muslim” or “Christian”, etc.^{viii} It is important to remember when examining women’s roles at any stage of historical, social or cultural circumstances that religion, however important, is only one of the variables.

The repressive aspects of the Bangladeshi culture are well known, with continued imposed limits on travel, dress, thought and behavior for

women, coupled with an institutionalization of a second-class status for girls and women.

In the early twentieth century, reformist thinkers like the Holy Cross Sisters focused on one or two elements they thought accounted for the oppression of women. The early work of the Sisters must be noted as an important element in the empowerment of Bangladeshi women. Over the past years in Bangladesh, a number of new thinkers have emerged, both religious and secular, including many women who have and are fighting effectively for increasing women's rights. They have presented numerous talks and writings that champion equality and inclusivity, while at the same time retaining Bangladeshi identity. The range of these new writings and talks makes them difficult to summarize, but all reflect a raised consciousness.

What are the implications for Bangladeshi women within the context of globalization and what role, if any, will the Sisters of the Holy Cross play in the continued empowerment of women? Although the constitution of Bangladesh states that women have equal footing with men in all spheres of public life, it also recognizes religious personal laws which are unequal to women. In spite of the declaration of equality in the Constitution, women

continue to be deprived of their guaranteed rights by some of the discriminatory civil and religious laws.

As a whole, women's participation in social and political contexts, including decision-making remains very insignificant. Most discouraging is the fact that the majority of women are not aware of their own rights. Even today they lack self-confidence and command very little respect in society. Women still form a marked underclass. According to the Human Development Report, approximately fifty percent of women are estimated to have experienced domestic violence. The literacy rate of Bangladeshi women is 31.4% which remains far below that of men estimated to be 50.3%. Even though the majority of the population is Muslim, both Muslim and non-Muslim women face gender discrimination under their religious laws.

What the past confirms and the future demands is belief that change for a better future for women and girl children in South Asia is possible through partnership. No society can ever develop fully if half of its population is marginalized. American feminist Joan Chittister warns that societies and religions that continue to oppress women are severely crippled. They stand on one foot, see with one eye, hear with one ear and think with

half a brain. As a result, they are depriving themselves of the fullness and creativity of half of their population.

If we could look into the future, what would we see? I think we would recognize that the spirituality of women gives them a tremendous capacity to overcome adversity. We'd see that given the smallest opportunity and with even a little support, women can become agents of transformation in the family and society.

If we, as a global community, follow the visionary model of the Sisters of the Holy Cross and our own collective voice to become agents of transformation, religion does not have to continue to be a sadly divisive part of the world's problems.

It is this original vision of the Sisters, inspired by the Holy Spirit and implemented in Bangladesh nearly eighty years ago, that offers us a basis for universal recognition of one another as brothers and sisters in God.

Guided by the Holy Spirit, the vision belongs to the now and to the future as well. The prophet Habakkuk said it well, "Slowly, steadily, surely, the time approaches when the vision will be fulfilled. If it seems slow, do not despair, for these things will surely come to pass. Just be patient! They will not be overdue a single day."^{ix}

ⁱ From 1962-1965, Catholic Bishops from all over the world met in Rome and published a document entitled, "Declaration on the Relation of the Church to Non-Christian Religions." The document declared that "the Church rejects nothing of what is true and holy in these religions." It urged its people to enter with prudence and charity into discussion and collaboration with members of other religions.

ⁱⁱ Shehzia Hag, alumna of Holy Cross School 1972-84. She now is employed at Siemens in California as a software engineer.

ⁱⁱⁱ These remarks were offered by graduates of Holy Cross College who are currently living in Bangladesh.

^{iv} Selina Parveen Rahman, Assistant Professor, Department of English, Holy Cross College, Dhaka, Bangladesh, alumna, 1978.

^v United Nations News Archives, June 11, 2007.

^{vi} Holy Cross College Handbook, Dhaka, Bangladesh, 2007.

^{vii} Anasuya Sengupta, student at Lady Shri Ram College for Women, New Delhi, India, March 1995.

^{viii} Ibid., p. 21.

^{ix} Habakkuk 2:2-3.