

**Convocation address  
Central Women's University**

**Dream, Dedication and Social Responsibility:  
Resources for the Journey Ahead**

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**Chairman and members of Board of Trustees, Central Women’s University, Vice Chancellor, Central Women’s University, Chief Guest, the Honorable Minister of Education, Special Guest, Chairman of the University Grants Commission, distinguished guests, graduating students and their family members.**

It is indeed an honor and privilege for me to be invited to deliver the convocation address of Central Women’s University which is the first and only women’s university approved by the University Grants Commission (UGC) of Bangladesh. I understand this is the second convocation organized by this university and the first one under the new management. It is a special day of pride as this convocation is being held fifteen years after the first convocation in 2002. Central Women’s university has gone through challenging time in the past but I am happy to note that it is now turning around. I am particularly pleased that I can be present at this special moment in the life of this university and its students I too share your sense of joy and achievement. I congratulate all the graduating students for crossing an important milestone.

I recall with some mixed feelings two convocations of my own student life. The first convocation was in 1964 at Dhaka University when I was to receive my BA (Hons) and MA degrees. The convocation, however, could not take place as students were protesting the presence of the Chancellor, the governor of then East Pakistan, Monem Khan. Police came to rescue the Chancellor, threw tear gas and arrested some of the protesting students. We were not all that unhappy that we could not go through the convocation ceremony as we felt that the protest against Monem Khan, who was appointed by the military dictator Ayub Khan, was justified. My second convocation experience, when I received my Ph. D degree at Harvard University in the USA in 1970 was, however, completely trouble free. I still remember how I felt that day as being on top of the world – as if I had climbed Mount Everest. I am sure some of you are feeling the same way today.

While graduation is a time for celebration, it is also in some way a time of anxiety as you have to now think of your future – what kinds of employment or profession you would seek, whether you would go for higher education, or you would decide to be a full time homemaker. When we were graduating from Dhaka University nearly fifty years ago, only a limited number of occupations were available to women. We had to choose to be either a teacher or a doctor. Women could compete in the civil service examination but they were not allowed to join either the foreign service or the administrative service. They had to serve only in the audits and

accounts service. There were no students in the engineering university. No woman was practicing law in Dhaka courts. Women who had degrees in law were teaching at Dhaka University. Women were absent in private sector jobs. Journalism was an all male profession.

Today there has been a sea change in the labor market. There is no service where women are barred from entering. They are not only in the civil service; they serve in police and the military services. Women are working in various jobs in the public and private sector. They are flying planes and one woman was celebrated as a driver of a train! When Bangladesh emerged as an independent country in 1971, we could hardly see women walking on the streets. Public space was overwhelming male dominated. Today early in the morning or in the evening we see thousands of women walking on the streets; they are the garment workers or domestic help either going to or coming back from work. It has been a very satisfying experience for me to witness this social transformation during my own life time.

In the last three or four years when you were a student at the university I am sure you had to listen to many advises of your own teachers. So today which is a happy occasion you are probably not in a mood to listen to any more advise. But as I had been primarily a teacher all my life I can not help but give some advice based on lessons I learnt from my own life experiences which I hope will be of some use to you.

The first lesson I learnt is that for a woman it is very important to have a dream, and to hold on to one's dream no matter what the obstacles are. And one must work hard to achieve one's dream. When I was going to school in the 1950s in various small towns in Bangladesh – Comilla, Bagerhat, Bhola, Munshiganj – I always dreamed that one day I will go abroad for higher studies and get a degree from one of the world's top most universities. I was very fortunate that my parents, particularly my father, was very supportive. I knew to realize my dream I have to do exceptionally well in my studies and win a scholarship to go abroad as my parents did not have the money to support my education abroad. I pursued my dream and I did succeed in competing for and winning a state scholarship to go to Harvard University in the USA for higher studies in 1965. At that time there were very few women students at Harvard. For example in the political science department out of 40 post-graduate students enrolled every year there were only 4/5 girls. Even a fewer number of girl students succeeded in getting their degrees. I succeeded in getting my Ph. D in 1970. I was probably the first Bengali woman to get a Ph. D from Harvard.

The four years I spent as a student at Harvard, were challenging as I had to compete with the “best and the brightest” students gathered from around the world. The challenges were manifold. For the first time in my life I had to speak in English which was difficult as I studied in Bengali medium schools. At Harvard I had to learn to speak out in the class whereas in Dhaka University the norm in those days were for girl students to keep silent. At Harvard I had to learn to do critical analysis of what I read and not simply memorize it. Learning new skills were challenging but at the same time very satisfying. Overcoming the challenges made me confident about my own capabilities. I made many friends through discussion and debates inside and outside the class room. Many of these friends have gone on to become world renowned scholars. I have still maintained friendship with some of them even after all these years. Those highly competitive four years at Harvard were also the happiest years of my life. Harvard made me the person I am today.

Two expressions I heard when I first went to Harvard University have always remained with me as lifelong lessons. The first expression was “sky is the limit”. I was brought up in a society where as a girl I had to always hear what I can not do. Society put so many restrictions to limit my opportunities and aspirations. To hear “sky is the limit”, that there can be no limit to my aspirations so long as I am capable of achieving it was such a novel and inspiring idea!

The second expression I heard at Harvard which, again, made a lifelong impression on me is “sink or swim”. This means you must learn how to swim or otherwise you will drown. So my first advice to the graduating students is: remember sky is the limit of your ambition but you must strive hard to realize your dream. You must also remember that every challenge in life is also an opportunity to find your own inner strength and potential.

The second lesson I learnt is that if I want to pursue my dream, I cannot be too worried about what others or society will think. Social norms change when we can demonstrate that change is good for society. When I returned from the USA and joined Dhaka University Political Science Department in 1970 as an Associate Professor and became the head of the department in 1973 I was quite young, barely thirty years old. Chairmen of other departments at Dhaka University were all over 50 years old. There were only three women serving as department heads at that time. Initially there was some surprise, some doubt as to whether and how a young woman like me will carry on the administration and management of the political science department, which was one of the largest departments of the university. But I found after few

months my presence in the meetings of the academic council and other administrative committees of the university did not create any stir and was accepted as a normal procedure. So my second advice to the graduating students is: do not let worries about social approval hold you back in pursuing your dreams. If you succeed in breaking unjust and unwritten barriers you will find others will follow in your footsteps. And soon attitude of society will change. You will be appreciated and celebrated as a role model.

The third lesson I learnt is that to overcome social prejudices and obstacles, it is very important for a woman to have the support of family, teachers and bosses in workplace. I was fortunate to have such support, particularly support of men, all through my life which helped me to overcome the obstacles of our patriarchal society. It was my father who first encouraged me to have career ambitions. He treated his girls and boys equally. He gave me all the support I needed when after my M.A. I wanted to go to the USA for higher studies and did not want to get married which was generally the social norm in those days. In my schools, college, and university I was again fortunate to have male teachers who mentored me to excel in studies. At Dhaka University two of my teachers, Professor Muzaffar Ahmad Choudhuri and Professor Abdur Razzaq were my mentors. They encouraged me to pursue my dream and never made me feel less equal than any body else because of my gender.

The fourth lesson I learnt is that as a woman I have to demand and protect my rights. Equality may be enshrined in our constitution but in reality there are many social norms that restrict its realization. Society expects that women will not make any demand for themselves. They may make demands for their children or husbands but they will be ever ready to sacrifice their own interest and well-being. I firmly believe that economic independence, ability to earn and control one's own income and assets, is critical to the realization of women's rights. With changing time and changes in family structure women can no longer completely rely on their family members to look after them when they are old or when they are in need. So my fourth advice to you is: use your education to enhance your income earning opportunities and make sure you control your own income. Many studies around the world show that often women, are not able to control their income. It is men in their families—husbands, brothers – who control their income.

The fifth lesson I learnt is that one need not excel in studies to be successful in life. I often meet many of my old students at Dhaka University who were not particularly good students but have

gone on to receive national recognition as footballer, cricketer, actor, singer, lawyer, businessman or politician. Some of my students have become mayors, trade union leaders, members of parliament and ministers. So my advice to you is: do not feel bad if your examination results were not all that good. There is more to life than being simply a good student. Your talents may lie in other areas. You need to discover them.

The final lesson I want to share with you is the importance of doing some volunteer work in life. You must keep in mind that there is nothing more satisfying than to be able to do some good to others on a volunteer basis. Career building, earning money, these goals are satisfying no doubt but after a certain point working for personal achievement is not so fulfilling. Only when you can engage your passion in promoting a public good you will find a true meaning to your life. I found great satisfaction when in addition to teaching and my own research and writing on politics I started writing on women's issues on a voluntary basis and became involved with the international women's movement.

Let me conclude by again congratulating you for completing your studies. I am sure many of you had to overcome various obstacles to achieve this goal. Enjoy the day as you reflect on your success! Remember many more opportunities are now available to you which were not there when we graduated nearly fifty years ago. But women still have barriers to cross. However if you have confidence in your ability you will be able to overcome obstacles. I am sure some of you who are graduating today have the potential to be the Vice Chancellor of a University, or a Chairman of the University Grants Commission, or a Chairman of the Board of Trustees of a University or the Education Minister or even the Prime Minister of Bangladesh. I wish you all the best for your future.