



Super university for women takes shape in Bangladesh

By Sarmad Qazi
Staff Reporter

When I met Kamal Ahmad in the lobby of a local hotel recently, we were both tired. It was past 10pm on a workday; one that for Ahmad, 43, included holding a series of tiresome meetings. The only day he had in Qatar.

After a quick exchange of greetings, when I right away brought up his project that we were supposed to discuss, Ahmad's eyes lit up with an unmistakable spark. The sluggishness was suddenly gone.

"The idea is very simple," the Bangladesh-born, attorney said. "It is to bring women from all across Asia, those who would be the first ones in their families ever to come close to university and to provide them with an extraordinary education that is comparable to the best in the world."

So is it a university?
"Well that's not all of it," he enthused.

"The idea is to cultivate an ethos (in the women) of endeavouring for change and sustaining a notion that each one of them is capable of extraordinary achievements."

The son of a university biochemist, Ahmad is nothing new to schools. He organised classes for poor kids in garages when he was 14 and after they were kicked out, started them in the open with each kid bringing a brick everyday to the class – and eventually a school was founded.

This time around, however, he has embarked on changing the core of the whole region and founded, Asian University for Women.

"We believe by creating a network of young women leaders who are drawn from all across the region will in a way setup for more enduring changes for years to come," Ahmad added.

After years of lobbying, the temporary campus of AUW was finally inaugurated last year by Nobel Laureate 2006 Dr Mohamed Yunus of Bangladesh, who also serves on the advisory board.

And when around 130 young women from Bangladesh, Cambodia, India, Nepal, Pakistan and Sri Lanka, following Islam, Hinduism, Buddhism and Christianity came face to face for the first time in their lives, Ahmad could not have been more thrilled.

"We come from a region where there has been a lot of conflicts based on religion, ethnicity, caste, and linguistics, so the idea that one university will bring all these students together with the practice of tolerance and respect and understanding, seems an obvious one," he said.

"Now you can imagine for a student who didn't even know

where Bhutan was to confront the ideas of a person from that region. We even put a Tamil in front of a Sinhalese student for the first time in their lives," Ahmad noted.

This year 200-250 more poor students from Afghanistan, Bhutan, China, Indonesia, Thailand, in addition to the countries that are already there, will be joining AUW - all on full scholarship.

"The moment we start breaking ourselves down in nations, races, ethnicities we are weakened and are in fact individually and collectively diminished," he maintained.

His belief in the openness of young people paid off when at the student-elections held two months after the youngsters arrived, the president, the VP and the treasurer were all Sri Lankans - elected by a group of people who didn't know them few months ago.

A secular institution, the charter of the AUW allows only 25% students can be from Bangladesh, while 75% are to be drawn from outside. Eventually, the university envisages having a student population with half paying fees while the other half on scholarships.

"We will systematically try to find those unfortunate yet extraordinary women, irrespective of where they will be," he said. "Shoes or no shoes we will get to them."

AT AUW, the curriculum uses certain pedagogical methods, classes are small, and teachers don't necessarily lecture. Students are involved in local research that affect the lives of people – just like themselves.

They are enrolled in a five year programme; the first three are devoted to liberal arts and sciences, while the final two years is a masters programme in business, law, computer science and engineering.

"We don't want them to be defeated by the marketplace so we felt very strongly to include the graduate programme also."

The university's acting vice chancellor and provost, Hoon Eng Khoo, a Smith College graduate, born in Malaysia in a house without running water or electricity, was vice dean of the prestigious National University of Singapore Medical School.

As for the faculty, Stanford University has promised to send two post doctoral fellows to serve at the AUW, while Aalborg University, Denmark will collaborate to establish a graduate programme in ICT.

Others are chipping in too. Cherie Blair has agreed to join and go to Hong Kong to raise money. Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, Goldman Sachs Foundation, Packard Foundation, Hewlett Foundation and George Soros lead the way among many others.

However, there are problems



Muslim and Buddhist students offer early morning prayers in the same room

since there is no precedent for this sort of an institution.

"For us we don't have many resources," Ahmad said.

One is building of a campus; the government of Bangladesh has donated 104.40acre of land for the university atop a hill in the country's second biggest city, Chittagong.

Worth \$400mn, the first phase of building alone needs \$55mn in addition to annual operating costs put at \$8mn-10mn, which is why I thought Ahmad, came to Qatar with the country's image of having deep pockets.

His answer, however, reminded me that assumption is a sin.

"We are looking for three things. We look at the South Asian diaspora (which Qatar surely has) as a pool of talent. We want to track the best of them to give us a hand because we can't build a top-class university unless we attract top-class talent," Ahmad said.

Essentially, he meant that educationists from South Asia are much likely to stay on in the long run, when that power outage happens and the water runs out.

"These people might also undertake local research, rather than esoteric issues."

Secondly, while believing in diversity, AUW is hoping to bring in

students of the diaspora families (and yes that includes South Asia, East Asia, Southeast Asia) to bring in an international perspective.

"And not least, you can't build one of the top-notch universities in one of the poorest countries in the world unless there is philanthropy. Because we made a bargain with the government that we want total autonomy, we don't get any funding and hence dependent of private support," he added.

As for transparency, AUW has employed Transparency International to audit its books in addition to regular processes of financial monitoring that

institutions bring in.

Totally sold on the idea, but still journalistically sceptical, I asked, hesitatingly, but why women?

"In our part of the world, women have consistently been neglected vis-à-vis family welfare, healthcare, social welfare. So the focus on education is important, but the focus on women's education is more important because of the broad affect it has on the society."

This novel project can be explored at www.asian-university.org while Ahmad can be contacted at kamal.ahmad@asian-university.org

President of varsity to join AUW

In Qatar, the president of Qatar University, Professor Sheikh al-Misnad has agreed to join the Advisory Council of Asian University for Women (AUW). "She graciously offered to join within 15 minutes of our conversation," Ahmad said. Two faculty members of the Carnegie Mellon University in Qatar (CMUQ), Prof Fahim Hussain (originally from Bangladesh) and Prof Bernadine Dias (originally from Sri Lanka), have also agreed to play important parts.

Prof Hussain will be joining the faculty in Bangladesh while Prof Dias has joined the board of directors.

"We don't probably pay at Qatar's level but it's the satisfaction for those joining us, of being part of a cause. Fifteen out of the 16 offers of faculty we made were accepted. There's a Princeton PhD, one from MIT, Stanford has agreed to provide two more in addition to the two already being provided. It has become a global effort," Ahmad said.



Duth Kimsru, 20, from Cambodia wants to be a teacher for disadvantaged children



Kailaiyangiri Mahilini, 21, from Jaffna Sri Lanka, wants to help those affected by conflict



Minza Yaqoob, from northern areas of Pakistan wants to work for an NGO



Jiby Mol Mathew, 17, from India, wants to solve India's water pollution



Neeru Ghale, 23, from Nepal, aspires to pursue environmental engineering.



Papiya Tanchangya, 19, from Bangladesh. A tribal, she wants to use education in saving history.



Nobel Laureate Dr Yunus with AUW's faculty from across the world