

Bangla varsity to transform women's education in Asia

By Hemchhaya De

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DUBAI — There will soon be a mini revolution in Chittagong. The Asian University for Women (AUW), which will be opened in the Bangladeshi port city in March next year, is set to redefine women's education in Asia.

The first-of-its-kind regional university for women will cater for students from all socio-economic backgrounds. It aims to be a world-class seat of learning attracting students from South and South-east Asia and the Middle East. Boasting a state-of-the-art campus spread across 100 acres in a lush green, hilly area, the university will offer a comprehensive five-year programme that includes three years of liberal arts education followed by two years of graduate/professional study.

The key areas of study will include management, engineering, information technology, education and public policies. The residential university will focus on helping women to become innovative leaders in their fields and promote intercultural understanding and sustainable development in Asia and other parts of the world.

"There are several women's educational institutes in Asia, true. But AUW will be different from these institutes in several ways. Firstly, it will be truly multi-cultural. We will also try to attract students from underprivileged sections of the society.

"The Parliament of Bangladesh has granted a charter to AUW whereby we will be given institutional autonomy and full academic freedom," says Kamal Ahmad, Vice Chair, Asian University for Women Support Foundation.

Explaining the need for a women's university, he says, "There is a great deal of evidence that women need a separate space to voice their concerns. A study that examined the achievement of women graduating from women's colleges in 1910 and later

found that high achieving women in the US were more likely to have graduated from women's colleges than from co-educational institutions."

"The university proposes to introduce a range of perspectives on women's role and position in society and provide a space where each could be critically and reflectively examined in an environment that is supportive of women and their particular concerns," he adds.

More importantly, Ahmad goes on to say, women from some parts of Asia are still discouraged from attending coeducational institutes. So, AUW will be an ideal option for them, he adds.

In response to a question regarding why the university focuses on liberal arts, Dr Hoon Eng Khoo, Vice-President for Academic Planning, AUW, speaking to Khaleej Times from Dhaka, said, "Liberal arts graduates are equipped with the skills to become valuable community members. They understand problems, generate solutions, and communicate those solutions to others. AUW aims to be a world-class institution of higher education dedicated to preparing talented Asian women for leadership in political, economic, social and cultural spheres."

There will be a strong emphasis on entrepreneurship. Students will be encouraged to take unconventional approaches to their initiatives. Workshops with leading entrepreneurs as mentors will be held regularly as part of the "incubation" programme. Students will also be taking up internships with leading companies across the globe.

Admission to the university will be merit-based. There will also be an Access Academy to prepare students, who are weak in some areas like English and Maths, for the main academic programme.

The AUW initiative is mainly supported by the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, which has donated around \$15 million to the project. Other sponsors include the Goldman Sachs Foundation, the Citigroup Foundation and the US government. "We hope to appeal to the UAE government for support," says Ahmad.

Nobel Prize winner Muhammad Yunus is on the university's advisory committee. The International Support Committee for AUW includes the Prime Minister of Bangladesh (co-chair), Madame Lone Dybkjaer, member of the Danish parliament, Rasha Al Sabah, under-secretary for higher education in Kuwait and Thoraya Ahmed Obaid, executive director of the United Nation Population Fund. The Board of Directors is expected to include Ratan Tata, chairman, Tata Group, India, and Kiran Mazumdar-Shaw, founder of Biocon India, among others.