

One in four women are beaten by their husbands

Why are we still tolerating this?

A BBS (Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics)-Unicef survey has come up with some valuable findings that sum up the realities of the majority of women and children in the country. No doubt, there have been significant positive trends over the years: a high rate of primary school attendance, major reduction in child mortality and chronic malnutrition, increase in the availability of drinking water, better access to and use of toilets—all indicators of a better state of wellbeing of women and children. Unfortunately such successes are grossly overshadowed by the morbid data on violence against women and children.

The most shocking data is on domestic violence, with over 25 percent of women aged 15 to 49 years being beaten by their husbands for the most trivial reasons. The five main reasons behind this violence are: going out of the house without the husband's permission, not being attentive enough to the children, arguing with the husband, not agreeing to have sex and burning the food while cooking. The age group gives an idea that many of these "women" are actually children and as the survey has found, child marriage is still very high. These statistics indicate how dominant a role gender inequality plays in women's lives. The low status of women in our society relates to the fact that most women are not financially independent, which makes them more vulnerable to such violence. But more than that, it is the overall societal view of women—that they are inferior in status, that their role is to primarily serve their husbands and the household, that their needs are not important and that they do not deserve respect—that encourages domestic violence.

The survey has also given a grim picture regarding the violence inflicted on children, with 9 in ten children experiencing some form of violence in the name of disciplining by their caregivers. Add to that the terrifying statistics of children being raped or subjected to other forms of sexual violence as highlighted by human rights organisations, and we can see how precarious the lives of our children are.

The survey should be a wakeup call for the government and the society as a whole that we have a long way to go before we can say that women are empowered and that there is gender equality. In fact such findings show that we have fallen severely behind in meeting the SDG goal 5 that, among other things, aims to eliminate all forms of violence against women and children. We must take immediate steps to protect women and children by bringing about changes in the way society as a whole treats them.

High Court's query on the Digital Security Act

That's our question too

THE HC has issued a rule on the government asking why two of the sections of the Digital Security Act, 2018 (DSA) should not be declared illegal. While the HC has referred to Sections 25 and 31 only, we feel, and we have made this known since before the bill was passed as law, that many more provisions of the DSA should be scrapped—those being in violation of the fundamental tenets of the constitution—particularly sections 21, 25, 28, 31, 32, and 43, which go against freedom of speech and independent journalism.

The media, and print media in particular, had been constantly highlighting the gross lacunae in the Bill during its finalisation process, but it was passed rather hastily. The law is not only draconian, it is vague in many instances and gives wide and unlimited power to the law enforcing agencies. A law that empowers the police to take drastic measures against a publishing house or arrest a journalist on mere suspicion that an offense under this law might be committed, can be anything but conducive to the idea of a free media or to the concept of freedom of speech.

The reservations of the media had been highlighted in meetings with the law minister and through detailed explication of each of those sections that hamper freedom of speech and impose unwarranted restrictions on journalists in the performance of their professional duty. The law minister had also concurred with the worries expressed by the Editors' Council as being logical and had assured the nation, following a meeting with the Council and the Parliamentary Standing Committee on Post, Telecom, and ICT, that the loopholes and vagueness in the Act would be removed. And that was nearly six months before the Bill was passed in September 2018, without any changes being made.

We believe that laws are meant to be facilitative rather than restrictive. We also believe that the government needs to safeguard the nation against cybercrime, but to introduce a law to chastise those that do not "fall in line" with the government is neither helpful for inculcating a free media nor to democracy.

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

letters@thedailystar.net

The fate of the Rohingya

In January, the International Court of Justice ordered Myanmar to "take all measures within its power" to protect the Rohingya population from genocide. Conditions in Myanmar for those Rohingya who remain are grim. So far, the overall picture for the Rohingya is bleak. In Bangladesh, the government has put in place a series of security measures that limit the access of the Rohingya to the outside world. Inside the camps, the resulting desperation is palpable.

At a more fundamental level, the Rohingya in Bangladesh have been denied a meaningful say in their own daily affairs and in discussions about their future. Their voices remain largely absent from deliberations surrounding their return to Myanmar or their relocation to Bhasan Char, an island in the Bay of Bengal. This needs to change.

Aviva Shwayder, Washington, DC, USA

The Accidental Truthteller

A review of CEC's comments about leaders



BADIUZZAMAN BAY

IF Chief Election Commissioner (CEC) KM Nurul Huda is not your favourite go-to guy when you look for truths, he has only himself to blame. Throughout his time in office, the CEC has done to truths about elections what a three-year-old does to its toy cars: toss them around with carefree abandon. The banality of his artless statements can only be rivalled by his enduring faith in them (recall his routine defence of every election that he has conducted as "free, fair and credible"—which is, frankly, no longer funny). But of late, I am beginning to see in him a man capable of courting facts occasionally.

The reason for this little hopeful note is a recent comment by the CEC about the state of leadership in Bangladesh, in which he came "dangerously" close to the truth. While inaugurating a workshop for newly recruited election officials, the CEC said: "Often it is seen that someone who extorts money from hawkers in Gulistan later becomes a leader. One day he can be a parliamentarian too." (Prothom Alo, February 16). He also talked about other problematic people that the Election Commission has to deal with, including the "malam party" (mugging gangs that use toxic cream on their victims), pickpockets, bag snatchers and "casino members". Although he was vague about what those people have to do with the EC, the indication in the first part of the comment is quite clear.

First of all, what is striking about it is that the CEC has chosen to speak out, albeit briefly; a refreshing departure from his usual hear-no-evil-see-no-evil routine. His statements are usually couched in bland generalities, and

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SALEEMUL HUQ

THE Bangladesh parliament, led by the parliamentary standing committee on environment, recently declared a planetary emergency in Bangladesh. This is ground breaking in that most other parliaments around the world have declared a climate change emergency, but none have also added a biodiversity emergency as the Bangladesh parliament has. So ours is a twin track emergency, not just a single track.

While this is indeed a pioneering resolution, it will mean very little unless implemented.

The climate emergency side of the twin track declaration has already received significant priority within national planning and even budgeting by virtue of the clearly visible adverse impacts of climate change that Bangladesh has already started to face over the last few years.

The good news is that the government is about to publish the revised Bangladesh Climate Change Strategy and Action Plan (BCCSAP), which will take us to 2030, while the original BCCSAP from 2009 has reached its end. The most important element in the revised BCCSAP is that instead of having separate and parallel funds and projects for tackling climate change, we now need to rapidly shift into mainstreaming or integrating climate change actions into all national, sectoral and local level plans, as well as into every ministry's and agency's workplan going forward.

The upcoming preparation of the 8th Five Year Plan is a great opportunity for the Bangladesh government to again show how to integrate climate change into all chapters of the plan, and not just a stand-alone chapter for environment and climate change.



Chief Election Commissioner KM Nurul Huda (centre).

PHOTO: ANISUR RAHMAN

often appear to favour the powers that be. Going by his own standards, his February 16 remark marks a difference. In his observation, the CEC frames his sentences carefully, afraid lest he say too much or offend anyone, but says enough to drive home the important message that money, crimes and power are intrinsically connected with today's elections in Bangladesh. If this is the CEC's way of telling a political story, his setting is Gulistan, his protagonist is a small-time crook, and his plot revolving around the said crook's meteoric rise through the dark corridors of politics leading all the way up to the high seats of power.

Shortly after the CEC's comment, as if to validate his point, news broke out about the alleged involvement of an MP in human trafficking in Kuwait (a charge that he categorically denied). A local newspaper picked up the story after the Kuwaiti media published reports on the arrest of an unidentified Bangladeshi on charges of money laundering, human trafficking and illegal visa trading. According to the Arabic daily *Al-Qabas*, the suspect is a member of a three-man racket whose other members include a Bangladeshi MP. It added that the trio occupied sensitive positions in three major companies that brought over 20,000 Bangladeshi workers into the country in exchange for large sums of money believed to be in excess of 50 million dinars. The MP allegedly channelled the money to the US to set up a company in partnership with an American national.

Unfortunately, money, crime and power walk hand in hand in Bangladesh. They form the triple nexus in our

politics. But stories like the above show just how far the rot has spread. Even in his most truthful state, the CEC has only scratched the surface of a minefield that holds the dark secrets of politicians of all stripes. Today, most politicians—whichever party they belong to—no longer vary in kind, but in degree, the degree to which they are susceptible to the corrupting influences of money and power.

We are talking about a culture that breeds corruption and is protected by the corrupt. Here, leaders rise through the ranks of their parties not because of their honesty, willingness to serve, or their grassroots appeal, but because of their strategic value and how much they can bring to their party's coffers. They hold important public offices despite damaging conflicts of interest, and hardly ever have to face trials for corruption should they belong to the right side of power. The drug lords and yaba godfathers, the unscrupulous businessmen, the thugs and gangsters, all are welcome in the sinister embrace of this corrupt system. Power is the new Holy Grail in Bangladesh, and nothing is off-limits in its pursuit.

We get a broader picture of this situation from the Democracy Index 2019 of the Economist Intelligence Unit published last month, in which Bangladesh, once again, fell in the "hybrid regime" category, meaning that substantial irregularities often prevent the elections from being free and fair. The hybrid regime has been defined as one in which "government pressure on opposition parties and candidates may be common.... Corruption tends to be widespread and the rule of law is

weak. Civil society is weak. Typically, there is harassment of and pressure on journalists, and the judiciary is not independent."

But the apparent euphoria expressed by some after Bangladesh climbed eight notches up the index (Bangladesh was ranked 80th among 165 independent states and two territories worldwide, up from its 88th position a year ago) is another proof of just how little we care about our democratic health or expect our leaders to guide us to a better future. The beneficiaries of the irregularities cited above are well-known to everyone, apparently even to the CEC, who (along with his predecessor) will have to answer for his role in conducting one controversial election after another and thereby creating an environment conducive to the operation of a hybrid regime.

But for now, let's stick to the subjects of the CEC's comment. His Gulistan, if taken in the right spirit, is a metaphor for the entire country, his crooks symbolise all who are searching for a backdoor access to power, and his leaders are bound by their shared lust for power and money. This must be one of his most honest moments so far, right?

Or, alternatively, we're reading too much into his comment. It was probably one of his many bland generalities that fall neither here nor there, and that are not meant to be taken seriously. After all, as a review of all that he has said and done so far will suggest, there is unlikely to be an appetite in him for a turnaround now.

Badiuzzaman Bay is a member of the editorial team at *The Daily Star*. Email: badiuzzaman.bd@gmail.com

Protecting the environment should be everyone's concern



SALEEMUL HUQ

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Thousands of children from different schools and colleges bring out a procession at Manik Mia Avenue expressing solidarity with the global climate strike.

PHOTO: STAR/PABIR DAS

At the same time, the ministry of finance should be lauded for preparing a climate change budget every year for the last few years, and should be encouraged to include even more ministries in the next year's budget. It also needs to enhance the monitoring and evaluation of these expenditures to assess their actual effectiveness on the ground.

Also, non-government organisations (NGOs), private sector, education sector and media need to gear up their own actions to tackle climate change so that it is a whole-of-society effort and not just a whole-of-government effort.

Here, it is important to also point out the synergies with the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), of which, SDG 13 is explicitly about tackling climate change—hence these efforts at finding synergies across sectors will give us significant dividends in enhancing the quality of our economic development going forward.

When it comes to protecting our biodiversity, which includes both individual species of plants and animals, as well as entire habitats and ecosystems, we are unfortunately in a very bad position as we have failed to protect our natural environment because of the kind of growth we have pursued. We now stand at a very significant crossroad, where a business-as-usual attitude will lead to us losing whatever natural resources we have left in a very short period of time. Hence, protecting the environment while also growing has to be the new agenda going forward. This paradigm shift goes under several terms such as green development or Nature Based Solutions (NBS), but the label is less important than the necessity to acknowledge that every day we are destroying our natural environment bit by bit, and that this must not just stop but be reversed as soon as possible.

This is where the parliamentary standing committee on environment

has a very important role to play, as it is the constitutionally mandated body to oversee that national development is protecting and not destroying our natural environment. It's declaration of the planetary emergency has demonstrated that it is indeed very concerned about these issues. But now it needs to exert its constitutionally mandated power over the executive to ensure that it means what it says.

I would also like to add that there is an extremely energetic resource that they can harness if they wish, namely the youth of our country, starting with all the university students and then high school and even primary school students. The paradigm shift that is needed is to make this agenda everybody's agenda and not just leave it to government authorities only.

At the same time, the Ministry of Environment, Forest and Climate Change (MOEFCC) has an extremely important role to play within the government, where its role is to try to protect the natural environment against forces, often other powerful ministries within the government, who want to get permission to build over natural habitats. I must say that over the last few decades, the different heads of the ministry have recognised their duty and done their best to try and protect the environment, but have often failed against the desires of powerful interests, both within as well as outside the government.

Hence, we have to realise that protecting our natural environment requires us to fight the forces who want to destroy it in every way possible, from within the government by the MOEFCC, and outside it by conscious citizens, who will oppose any visible destruction of the natural habitat that they see happening anywhere in the country.

The most effective means of protecting our natural environment is for every citizen to see it as her or his duty to do so. I believe we can do it.

Saleemul Huq is Director of the International Centre for Climate Change and Development at the Independent University, Bangladesh.