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FOUNDER EDITOR
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Gamekeeper turns poacher

Give the River Commission the teeth to save the rivers

IT is an irony that not only the government but also those who are tasked specifically to save the rivers are hastening their end, wittingly most of the time and unwittingly perhaps, in a few cases. This fact was brought out starkly at a roundtable titled "Protection of River to Save Agricultural Economy, Life-livelihood and Environment: Role of State and Citizens" at the virtual discussion organised jointly by the Bangladesh Environmental Lawyers' Association (BELA), Association for Land Reform and Development (ALRD), and *The Daily Star*, marking the World Rivers Day 2020. The underlying, disquieting fact that one gets from the proceedings of the roundtable is that the engagement of the administration in saving the rivers does not comport with the government's declared will, unfortunately. The citizens can only do so much, and even that comes to nothing if government actions are not effective enough in implementing its plans, notwithstanding the glossy policies and pronouncements.

There is little doubt that there is a combined indifference of the local administration and the department of environment, and in some cases their complicity with the perpetrators and collusion of the politically powerful with these agencies, who turn a blind eye to their illegal river filling and river grabbing activities. This, along with the failure of the authorities to provide the promised facilities for industrial estates for treating effluence, and unsupervised river reclamation operations, are gradually putting our rivers and water bodies into the throes of complete extinction. Poor planning has not helped saved the Buriganga, now a scintilla from the ravages of the tanneries; instead, the shifting of the tanneries from Hazaribagh to Savar has only added another of our rivers to the endangered list.

The suggestions made during the virtual discussion deserve the attention of the relevant authorities. The administration should demonstrate more commitment to its declared aim of saving the rivers. The agencies should increase their supervision and monitoring function, and they in turn should be monitored by a central authority. Last but not the least, the River Commission, which sounds very impressive on paper, is virtually ineffective, having no power to punish or penalise. It needs to be empowered. Every single agency and every local administration should remain accountable to a central body, who should have the authority of penal action against the defaulters.

Another batch of migrants thrown into jail

Authorities must stop punishing victims of human trafficking

UNDOCUMENTED migrant workers are internationally recognised as victims, people falling into the trap of transnational traffickers and their local agents and enablers. There are no two ways about it—nor about who the real criminals are. Any confusion about who's who is trumped-up and criminally exploited. So it baffles us that the government has stuck to the inexplicable exercise of sending these victims to jail, while no discernible action is being taken against those who have exploited them. According to the Brac Migration Programme, a total of 416 returnee migrant workers have been arrested during this pandemic, all under the dubious Section 54 of the Code of Criminal Procedure, which allows the state to detain those suspected of "tarnishing the country's image abroad."

The latest incident saw a batch of 32 returnee workers from Syria being thrown into jail on Monday, after the completion of their quarantine period. Earlier this month, another batch comprising 81 returnees from Vietnam were arrested, all of whom were victims of trafficking. In June, 219 returnees from Qatar, Kuwait and Bahrain were also detained after they reached home. Unfortunately, no charges have been brought against any of them yet. From time to time, we hear state officials and police peddling the "country image" theory, as if that justifies arresting people who are already victims of exploitation. When asked, police couldn't offer any valid reason for the latest case of incarceration, and a forwarding letter sent by the Turag police argues that: "If these people are allowed to walk free after quarantine, there is a possibility that they will spill all over the country and engage in crimes like robbery, terrorism, murder and anarchy." Arresting someone for no specific crime and based on a "possibility", unsubstantiated as it is, is not just absurd or illegal—it also speaks of a culture in which there is no legal safeguard for migrants who were forced to return home.

It is reprehensible that these migrants, after facing injustices abroad, are being unjustly held and harassed once again at home. We urge the government to immediately release all victims of human trafficking and conduct a fair investigation into the role of recruiting agencies who exploit the vulnerability of aspiring migrants. They are the ones who deserve to be in prison, not their victims.

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

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Horrors in hostels

The recent case of rape at MC College is another example of the misdeeds committed by student cadres of the ruling party. All student dormitories are supposed to be run by its authority and supervised by house tutors who are required to pay visits to dorms and counsel students. That is hardly maintained. Such insensibility of authorities and teachers fuels the audacity of students and their associates in committing such horrendous crimes. There seems to be no one brave enough to warn them or even supervise them given their political foothold. In every educational institution, the authorities must exert more power to ensure that safety is a number one priority.

Pranta Datta, *Chattogram*

NATIONAL GIRL CHILD DAY

Let our girls reach their full potential

NAZNIN TITHI

I can't stop thinking about Lovely—the 14-year-old adolescent girl who used to work at our house and became a full-time companion of my four-year-old son. She first came to our house with her aunt in search of a livelihood. Hailing from a disadvantaged family in Mymensingh, Lovely studied till grade IV and then was sent to the city by her parents to earn a living.

The first thing I noticed about her was that she was a fast learner. She had the ability to learn anything in the shortest possible time—be it a new Bangla word or the name of a particular toy car my son used to play with. When Covid-19 first broke out here, all my family members struggled to get used to the basic rules, such as wearing a mask or frequent hand washing. She was the only one who never forgot to wash her hands at any slightest possibility of being exposed to an outside object.

She left our house for her village home two months ago. A week after she left, I called Lovely's mother to find out how she was doing—now that she was with her family, but her mother didn't answer my calls. Then I called her aunt just to learn that Lovely was already married off to a construction worker in her village. Her aunt also told me that the decision was taken overnight by her father and grandfather. Lovely was forced into marriage.

When we look at the available data on child marriage in the country, all the tall talk about ensuring the rights of our girls—creating equal opportunities for them and ending all forms of discriminations faced by them—seem like mere words which, in reality, never translate into action.

It is time we translate our words into action and gear up efforts to save our girls from the curse of child marriage. We seriously need to ponder over the reasons why Bangladesh is doing so badly in reducing child marriage while other South Asian countries are showing a lot of progress here.

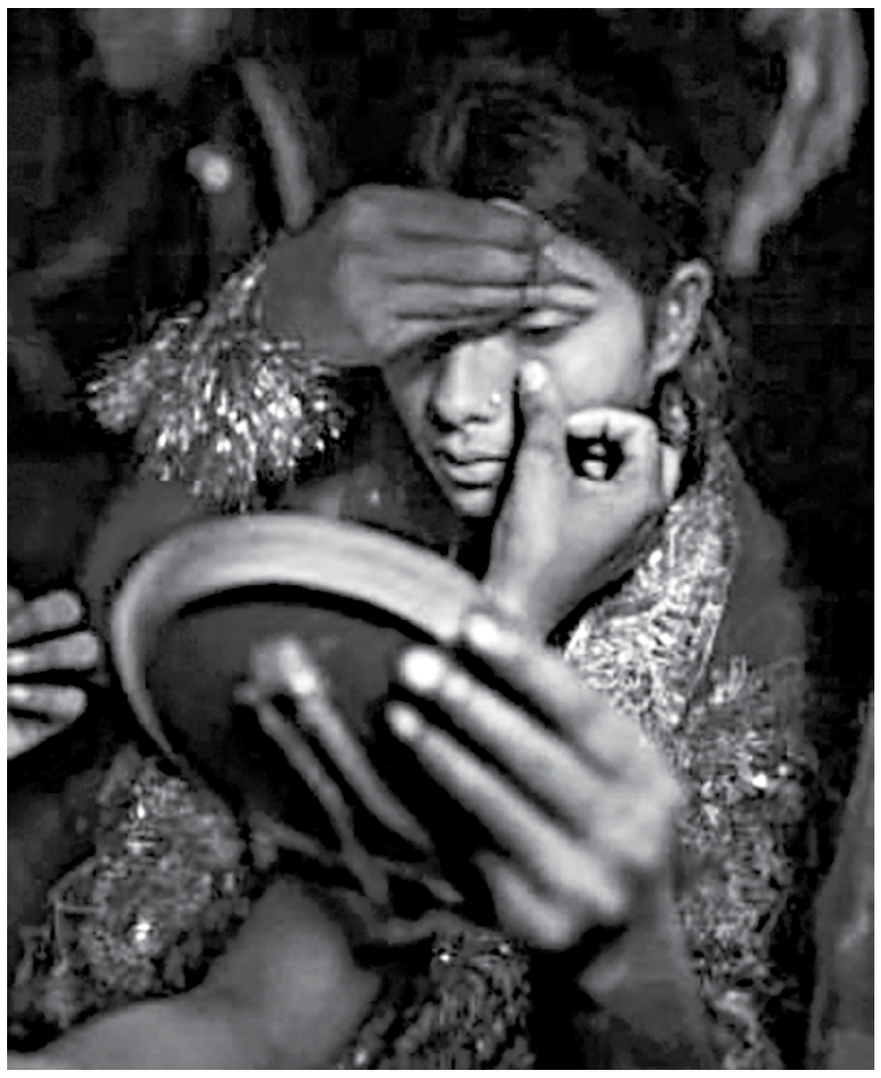

PHOTO: UNFPA

So, what has changed after so many years of social campaigning and efforts to rid our society of child marriage? How much progress have we actually made? According to a Unicef report published in 2018, the rate of child marriage increased in Bangladesh despite a drop worldwide and the rate in Bangladesh was the highest in South Asia. Also, a 2019 UNFPA report found that 59 percent of all the marriages that took place in Bangladesh between 2006 and 2017 involved brides below the age of 18. Clearly, child marriage is much more prevalent in our society than we imagine.

And the situation has further worsened during the pandemic, as some studies have found. According to Manusher Jonno Foundation's monthly telephonic survey report, as many as 462 girls fell victim to child marriage only in June this year, while a total of 170 child marriages took place across the country in May.

Understandably, the economic fallout of the pandemic has hit the poorest the hardest and during this time, many families have married off their girls while sending their boys to work. Educationists have predicted that when the time will come to send their children to school, these poverty-stricken families will send their boys rather than their girls.

Apart from poverty, there are many other socioeconomic factors that lead to child marriage. The constant fear among parents, both in urban and rural areas, about the safety and security of their daughters often force them to marry off their girls at an early age. However, what these parents do not consider or are not aware of is the fact that marriage at such a young age makes their daughters even more vulnerable. It is not only that early marriage brings early pregnancy and more maternal deaths, girls married at a young age can hardly raise their voice against any injustices done to them by their husbands and in-laws. Teenage brides are even more vulnerable to all types of torture and harassment by their in-laws. The parents who prefer early marriage for their daughters are just not aware that their daughters' only chance to get a better life could be achieved through empowering them with education. Then the question is, why have we failed to make the parents understand this basic fact despite our decades-long awareness programmes?

During her stay at our house, I found that Lovely was very good at her studies. While government surveys found that a vast majority of our children cannot read and write Bangla properly and do simple mathematical calculations even after completing primary education, Lovely, who only studied till Grade IV in a village school, could rapidly read Bangla books and newspapers and do some basic maths without much difficulty. Who knows how far she could have gone if her right to education was not snatched away from her and she was not forced into marriage at the age of 14?

Lovely represents the vast majority of rural Bangladeshi girls who never feel empowered to raise their voices for their rights, and are often forced into marriage at an early age.

But for how long will we let our girls suffer in silence because of this social evil? It is time we translate our words into action and gear up efforts to save our girls from the curse of child marriage. We seriously need to ponder over the reasons why Bangladesh is doing so badly in reducing child marriage while other South Asian countries are showing a lot of progress here.

While awareness campaigns against early marriage need to be conducted efficiently, we also need to ensure that our girls are not harassed or killed by their stalkers while going to school or elsewhere. It is the government's responsibility to ensure safety and security of our girls so that parents feel encouraged to send their daughters to school instead of marrying them off as a solution to harassment.

What we also need is a strong law that would act as a deterrent against this social evil. The Child Marriage Restraint Act, 2017, in its current form, cannot help much since a special provision was included in the Act allowing parents or guardians to marry off their children earlier by obtaining a court order, although according to the law, the minimum age for marriage for men and women are 21 and 18 respectively. The government must scrap this special provision if it is sincere about ending child marriage and ensuring equal rights and opportunities for our girls. Forming a monitoring cell with the participation of the government, civil society, judiciary and child representatives to monitor proper implementation of the Act, as the organisations working with child rights demanded when the Act was passed, should also be considered.

As we celebrate National Girl Child Day today, let us renew our pledge to end child marriage once and for all, and create an environment where our girls can grow up safely and reach their full potential.

Naznin Tithi is a member of the editorial team at *The Daily Star*.

Developing multiple strategies as part of the National Adaptation Plan for Bangladesh

POLITICS OF CLIMATE CHANGE

SALEEMUL HUQ

IN last week's column, I proposed that the Bangladesh National Adaptation Plan (NAP) that is now being developed should be innovative and not just a business-as-usual (BAU) report that will gather dust on a shelf, as many such plans have done in the past. I argued that we should focus on constructing the foundations for enhancing capacity building of many different institutions in the country to enable them to continue the implementation of the adaptation plans after the initial NAP exercise ends after a year or so.

But how can we help different ministries, agencies, training institutes, universities, private organisations and NGOs to develop their own respective adaptation plans for enhancing their capacity to adapt to climate change over the next ten years?

This would require each of the members of the team of national and international consultants, who have been selected by the government to carry out the task of developing the NAP over the next year or so, to be given the responsibility of engaging with several such key institutions and helping them develop their respective adaptation plans. The Department of Environment (DOE), who are in charge of preparing the NAP and also UNDP, who is supporting, should agree to such a non-BAU approach.

This will work only if the main sponsors of the NAP agree that the Bangladesh NAP should indeed aim to be an innovative one and go well beyond simply writing a report (although that still remains a basic output of the exercise).

One way to ensure that this is possible is for the core team to quickly come up with a basic template for any given institute to prepare its own ten year adaptation plan. The different consultants in the NAP team can then be assigned to several institutions who wish to get help in developing their respective adaptation plans.

Thus, the final product of the exercise after a year is not only one NAP in a single report, but rather a series of several dozen Institutional Adaptation Plans (IAPs), which would then be implemented by each institution in turn.

For this to happen, one should follow a basic process in creating a potential template that each institution can develop and implement over the coming years.

The first step in this process is to enable each institution to quickly assess the ways in which their work may be vulnerable to the adverse impacts of climate change. The good news is that most relevant institutions have already done this and many have, in fact, also embarked on different projects, which has resulted in building some basic capacities. Therefore, they can quickly move on to the second step, which will be to assess the specific capacity building needs of each institution and identify ways in which that can be done. This would then be followed by a third step to identify the final impacts after the next ten years and also the outcomes after five years. Thus, the intention should be to enable and assist each individual institution to develop their own adaptation plan and finally help them identify the amount of finance that will be needed and where it may be sourced from.

The first step in this process is to enable each institution to quickly assess the ways in which their work may be vulnerable to the adverse impacts of climate change.

STAR FILE PHOTO

Another important aspect of the Bangladesh NAP that we can find ways to be innovative about is to reach out to the different national adaptation plan preparation teams in different vulnerable developing countries around the world, and enable a process of peer-to-peer learning and sharing knowledge between countries in South-South as well as South-North global interactions.

Finally, there will need to be a focus on the most vulnerable hotspots of the country, and through local level consultations with different stakeholders, in order to identify potential adaptation needs at the local level that will then have to be planned and implemented. This will result in a set of Local Adaptation Plans (LAPs).

Through these different processes, we can try and come up with ways that the one year NAP exercise results in an effective ten year action plan to ensure that different stakeholders, as well as different parts of the country, have their own adaptation plans as LAPs, and all the major institutions have adaptation plans as IAPs, which will all be part of the National Adaptation Plan. This will indeed be a new and innovative approach to preparing such plans.

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