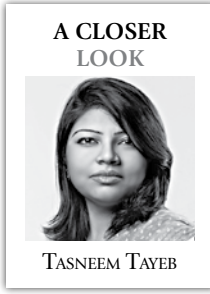


16 DAYS OF ACTIVISM AGAINST GENDER-BASED VIOLENCE

Sexual violence is an emblem of patriarchy in the guise of tradition



A CLOSER LOOK
TASNEEM TAYEB

A Bangladesh Bureau of Educational Information and Statistics (Banbeis) report from last year suggests that in 2018, girls formed 54 percent of the total number of students at the secondary level. In 1999, it was 43 percent. In another indicator of progress in women's life, maternal mortality has also reduced significantly. According to World Bank, the country's maternal mortality was 434 per 100,000 live births in 2000, which plummeted to 173 per 100,000 live births in 2017. The World Bank data further indicated improvements in female labour force participation, which in 2020 stands at 36.42 percent, up from 24.73 percent in 1990.

While these are successes worth acknowledging, our development is severely hampered by violence against women and girls, especially sexual violence, which has intensified in recent times. According to an estimate of Bangladesh Mahila Parishad (BMP), sexual violence against women doubled between 2010 and 2019. Let's take the number of rape incidents for example: in 2010, the number stood at 940, which more than doubled to 1855 in 2019. Rape is just one of the many forms of sexual violence women and children are forced to endure every day.

Marital rape, meanwhile, is an unacknowledged form of sexual violence unleashed on women, and unfortunately on girls too. Hundreds and thousands of women are forced to endure rape by their own husbands. And why? Because Section 375 of the Penal Code states, "Sexual intercourse by a man with his own wife, the wife

not being under 13 years of age, is not rape."

But why would a girl be married at 13 in the first place? "... if a marriage is solemnised in such a manner and under such special circumstances as may be prescribed by rules in the best interests of the minor, at the directions of the court and with consent of the parents or the guardian of the minor, as the case may be, it shall not be

consent is alien.

Often these young girls are subjected to forced coitus and sexual perversions, leading to significant damage to their reproductive health, not to mention the mental trauma they endure. The tragic story of 14-year-old Nurnahar, who died in October this year, after suffering from gynaecological complications following sexual intercourse with her 34-year-old husband and subsequent

bleeding. Despite being a woman—who must have understood what the little girl would have endured—the mother-in-law chose to overlook Nurnahar's trauma, and instead blamed her for her misfortune. Although the girl's family has reportedly filed a complaint with the local police station, chances of justice being served in this case are slim. She was 14 after all—meaning she wasn't raped by legal definition, even if she was.

There are men—fathers, brothers, uncles, grandfathers, in-laws, cousins, friends, acquaintances, strangers—who inflict sexual violence on girls and women every day. And then there are women—mothers, sisters, aunts, grandmothers, female relatives and friends—who discourage other women and girls from raising their voice against such brutality. It is this systematic suppression of women's voices by their own family and close associates, and sometimes by other women, that is emboldening the perpetrators of sexual violence.

The archaic and myopic definition of rape remains another major enabler of this heinous crime. The definition of rape in our law is confined to penile-vaginal penetration. So, if a man forcefully inserts an object into a woman through the vaginal opening, it would not be considered rape, because it has not been a penile penetration. But we have seen incidents of women being subjected to sexual abuse with objects. And how are those cases classified?

Although the government has increased the highest punishment for rape to the death penalty, it is not expected to result in significant change, as the rate of disposal of rape cases remains extremely low. An Amnesty International report citing data from the government's One Stop Crisis Centre suggests that between 2001 and July 2020, only 3.56 percent of cases filed under the Women and Children

Repression Prevention Act 2000 have resulted in a court judgment, and only 0.37 percent of cases have ended with convictions. The Amnesty International report further added, "Local women's rights organisation Naripokkho examined the incidents of reported rape cases in six districts between 2011 and 2018 and found that out of 4,372 cases, only five people were convicted."

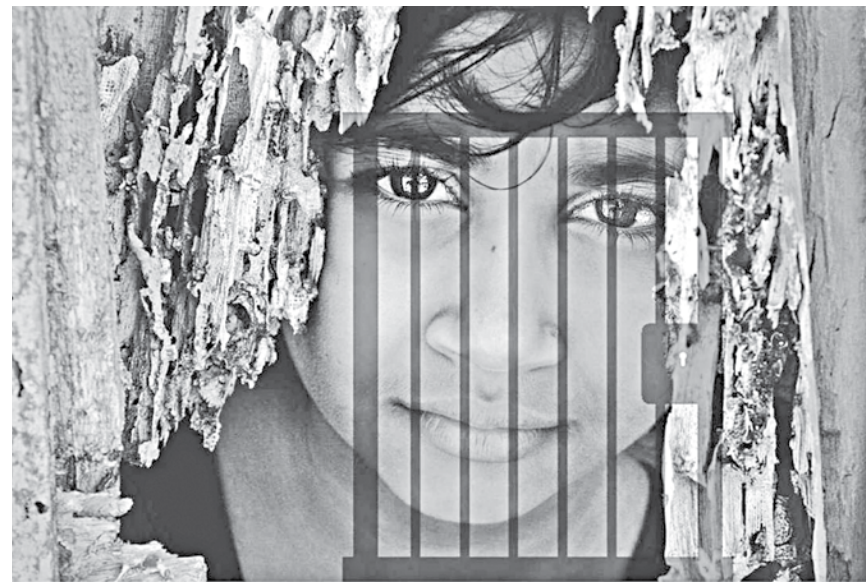
While these statistics and realities portray the problems that are enabling sexual violence against women, the bigger problem lies in our perspective.

Sexual violence against women is symptomatic of a patriarchal society refusing to act in its best interest. It is happening because of a lack of empowerment, because in an equitable society, this cannot happen. We are living in a society that, unfortunately, still sees a woman as an object that can be dominated, sexually and otherwise. And it is through this sexual dominance over women that the men in our country portray their power and ego.

And this should be a major concern for the policymakers, because this is a reflection of a fundamental disequilibrium: women's empowerment. The ties between economic growth and women's empowerment merits broader discussion, but suffice it to say, their connection is well-established. If we cannot empower women with sovereignty over their own bodies, how do we hope to give them control over their own destiny and that of the nation?

To truly end sexual violence against women, we have to break the cycle of patriarchy masquerading as tradition. We have to rise above the petty urge of the ego that wants to dominate, not just for vanity or the slogan of an equitable society, but for our own growth as a nation.

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To truly end sexual violence against women and girls, we have to break the cycle of patriarchy masquerading as tradition. PHOTO: KAZI TAHSEEN AGAZ APURBO

deemed to be an offence under this act." This is clearly stated in Section 19 of the Child Marriage Restraint Act, which fails to specify which scenarios qualify as "special circumstances." So, with no clear indication on what special circumstances mean, our girls remain vulnerable to the curse of child marriage and sexual exploitation at the hands of their husbands, who have been taught that wives are their possessions to do with them as they please, and to whom the concept of

lack of treatment, is a case in point. When the teenager reported that she was suffering from genital bleeding, instead of immediately consulting a gynaecologist, the husband kept having sex with her, causing injury and agonising pain. She was given medicine from a local *kabiraj*, and only when it was too late did the family decide to seek medical help. The girl succumbed to her injuries. The mother-in-law suggested that she was possessed by demonic spirits which caused the

What does a stable sovereign credit rating mean for Bangladesh?

MD ABDUL WASI

ON November 11, Fitch Ratings, a highly reputed international credit rating agency, affirmed a stable outlook on the sovereign credit rating of Bangladesh. At the same time, other nations in South Asia, specifically those that have comparable economic conditions, have either received a negative outlook or remained at a lower rating than us, as shown by Fitch. Therefore, it raises the question of whether we fared better under the current global pandemic conditions relative to other neighbouring nations.

In line with the opinion of this global rating agency, one can say that we have been successful, to a large extent, in maintaining our economic progress. To briefly explain, a credit rating is an assessment of the creditworthiness of a borrower (in this case a sovereign nation). Maintaining a stable outlook, particularly in the Long-Term Foreign-Currency Issuer Default Rating (IDR) of the sovereign, speaks to the resilience of its external finances and insignificant changes to the government debt quality. While we have received similar ratings in the past few years, maintaining the same stable outlook during the ongoing global pandemic is a noteworthy outcome.

In hindsight, one can argue that although we have maintained a stable outlook, the sovereign rating itself is

not considerably high when compared to other sovereign ratings globally. This argument is consistent; however, a relatively low rating is also expected in developing countries. A more important aspect in this analysis would be the change in ratings (i.e. the second order effect) around the negative macroeconomic shock induced by Covid-19. Contrary to the general expectation, based on the current stable rating outlook, we can infer that the quality of our sovereign debt has not deteriorated during the pandemic. This finding, thereby, can have potentially important implications for the broader economy as an unchanged sovereign rating can help maintain investor confidence in our sovereign debt instruments.

Another noteworthy aspect of this latest rating outlook is that our country ceiling of the ratings has also remained unchanged. This is an important phenomenon because, generally, rating agencies tend to apply a sovereign ceiling doctrine whereby during a sovereign downgrade, firms that have the same rating as the sovereign are also downgraded. This exercise is done to ensure that the ratings of the firms within the domestic economy do not pierce the sovereign rating ceiling. Therefore, given the stable sovereign rating outlook, our presumably large domestic firms (including banks and other state-owned entities) that have

the same rating as the sovereign are also unlikely to undergo a downgrade in their ratings, which can be important for their local and foreign business activities, unless their fundamentals decline.

To rationalise the stable rating outlook, we can utilise the GDP forecasts by the Asian Development Bank (ADB) for the current year of 2020. In the month of June, ADB had forecasted a positive GDP growth for Bangladesh, whereas there was a negative forecast for most other countries in ADB's comparative economic forecasts for South Asia. Today, a few months later and almost towards the end of the year, Bangladesh is in the leading position in terms of the GDP growth rate forecasts for 2020 relative to all other countries that are included in these comparative economic forecasts. This evidence lends support to the notion that despite bearing the brunt of the economic slowdown triggered by the global pandemic during the second and third quarters of the year, our GDP growth forecasts still materialise. Again, this is a considerable result, especially as other countries in South Asia face more difficulty in dealing with the economic impact of this ongoing pandemic.

Moreover, it is worth mentioning that this trajectory of the GDP growth is not for the current year exclusively. The data from the ADB suggests that

Bangladesh experienced the highest GDP growth rate in 2018 and 2019 amongst all the other countries that are included in the comparative economic forecasts data for South Asia. Therefore, it is evident that our economic growth has been sustainable, and this is probably the reason why we have been able to relatively absorb the shock caused by the current global pandemic. Furthermore, I do acknowledge the health concerns and the economic losses faced by various members of the society because of this pandemic. However, this is also a global crisis and, as we know, best efforts are being made to resolve it.

Finally, a small anecdote can shed further light on our discussion above. Fitch Ratings has downgraded the credit rating of South Africa on November 20, 2020. This is mainly due to the impact of the pandemic on the country's economy and, surprisingly, this rating is now equal to that of Bangladesh. These two countries are at different stages of economic development, where South Africa is more developed; nonetheless, their ratings are currently on a par. This anecdote highlights how the pandemic has hurt all economies, even more developed ones, and therefore our economy's resilience under such dire economic conditions further substantiates the positive economic outlook.

In summary, the current global

pandemic has adversely affected all economies. Thereby, one can expect a similar negative impact on our economy as well. While it is true that a number of businesses have been affected, the current stable (unchanged) status of our sovereign ratings also signifies the overall fiscal strength that our domestic economy has gained over time. This is further

This finding, thereby, can have potentially important implications for the broader economy as an unchanged sovereign rating can help maintain investor confidence in our sovereign debt instruments.

emphasised by the positive trend in the economic indicators, for example the GDP growth rate shown by international organisations such as the ADB. Hence, while our goal is to work towards further development, it may be worthwhile to incorporate the indications that we receive from reputable global agencies about our economy in this process.

Md Abdul Wasi is a lecturer of finance at North South University in Dhaka (currently on leave).

QUOTABLE Quote

EUGENE O'NEILL
(1888-1953)
American dramatist.

God gave us mouths that close and ears that don't... that should tell us something.

CROSSWORD BY THOMAS JOSEPH

ACROSS

- 1 Really stoked
- 6 Dominant
- 11 Carried
- 12 Principled
- 13 Stand up
- 14 Duck hunter's cover
- 15 Junior, to senior
- 16 Blend
- 18 PC key
- 19 Enjoy the slopes
- 20 Lot sight
- 21 Appear
- 23 Door sign
- 25 Immoral act
- 27 Heating choice
- 28 Fancy neckwear
- 30 Capital on a fford
- 33 1963 Paul

DOWN

- 1 Humbles
- 2 Sullen
- 3 Bride of July 1981
- 4 Print units
- 5 Judges
- 6 Moving at a relaxed pace
- 7 "Damn Yankees" role
- 8 Shrek's love
- 9 Plane's place
- 10 Birch cousin
- 17 Squeezee (out)
- 22 Amp plug-in
- 24 Eastern "way"
- 26 Perceives
- 28 Down Under denizen
- 29 Toe count
- 31 Joined
- 32 Cantankerous
- 33 Hirsute
- 35 Inflicted
- 38 Cartoonist Thomas
- 42 Court

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YESTERDAY'S ANSWERS

C	A	B	S			M	A	R	I	S					
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BEETLE BAILEY BY MORT WALKER

BABY BLUES BY KIRKMAN & SCOTT