



Photo: Shehzad Noorani

For a Smile, Not a Teardrop

SAARC countries observed 1990 as the Year of the Girl Child. We are not sure what good it did for our impoverished kids, but there was definitely some progress in consciousness raising. Then came the SAARC Decade of the Girl Child — 1991-2000. In case of Bangladesh the so-called Action Plan for the decade was launched a few months back, almost two and half years into the decade itself. We would like to believe that the delay in getting the Action Plan off the ground is no indication of any lack of seriousness on the part of the government. But then, actions speak louder than words, and we will judge the situation only on the speed of implementation of the plan. Given the critical nature of the problem and the urgency with which it needs to be addressed, *The Daily Star* decided to join hands with all national efforts — both government and non-governmental — and to lend a helping hand in promoting this urgent issue. Hence *The Daily Star* Round Table on "The Girl Child: Some Priority Concerns."

We invited some 14 leading national activists involved in grassroots programme and four international participants, working for Unicef, the UN Agency devoted to the welfare of children. The three and half hour of discussion brought out some stunning facts about the state of our girl children. The deprivation, abuse, violence and discrimination that our female kids are subjected to, is a national disgrace and a matter of urgent concern for the government, non-governmental bodies and all community based organisations. The Round Table also clearly brought out the need for a concerted action by the national media, especially radio and television to draw collective focus on the issue and mobilize public opinion for a more effective and action oriented programme to improve the lot of our Girl Children.

The Daily Star

Girl Child Special

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Urgent Actions Needed to Save the Girl Child from Social and Economic Victimization



"The majority of women in Bangladesh are disadvantaged and living under severe economic constraints, and thus the vulnerability of the girl child starts from within the womb."

Dr Kazi Anwar Mansur

Dr Kazi Anwar Mansur, Chairperson of the Bangladesh Shishu Academy stressed the need for a holistic development to improve the cause of the girl child and the need for setting up more schools.

Dr Mansur, who is also the Head of the Decade Action Plan for the Girl Child of Bangladesh chapter said that in the countries of South Asia, including Bangladesh, female children faced discrimination in many aspects of their life. The governments recognise that the future of this region depends upon improving the status of girls and women, she said.

"So that they can play a more active role in the development of their communities and there-by countries", said Mansur.

Refuting the statement that "Bangladesh is a resource-poor country", Dr Mansur said "I won't call it a barrier. If we can utilise the resource that we have, we can become the wealthiest country."

She urged more attention from every corner including policy-makers, governments and parliamentarians for integration of the girl child with the development process.

Terming the girl child as "the most vulnerable target of neglect", she maintained, "the majority of women in Bangladesh are disadvantaged

and living under severe economic constraints, and thus the vulnerability of the girl child starts from within the womb."

Moving to issues relating to education, the life-long educationist felt "BRAC is doing good, but we still need more schools to cope with the country's present need".

Lauding the government's present policies, Dr Mansur observed "whatever the government schools are doing, they are doing better than before."

"The present government's food for education programme has raised a new ray of hope, which will ensure fewer drop-outs in the schools", said Dr Mansur.

She also appreciated the government initiative for providing free education upto class eight for the girl child.

"The girls are future mothers — if they are educated, the whole family is educated", said the chairman.

She added that the government had announced stipends for girl children upto the degree level. She urged all concerned to create awareness of discrimination against the girl child and advocate the reduction of existing disparities between the situation of boys and girls.

"The gravity of the problem is to be understood, it is not so easy to solve and we hope for the better", concluded Mansur.



"Dolls are given to the girls and cars are to the boys" — this is how our society operates."

Advocate Sigma Huda

Advocate Sigma Huda in her opening statement said that although the Constitution of Bangladesh guaranteed equal rights and non-discrimination between men and women in all

spheres of the state and public life, discrimination still existed in reality due to the patriarchal nature of the society.

Stressing the need for changing our mind-set, the eminent lawyer said, "Unless we feel that girl child is an individual of the society, nothing is going to yield."

"Dolls are given to the girls and cars are to the boys" — this is how our society operates", she said.

She also criticised the women folk for maintaining double standards. "Mothers and the grand-mothers are responsible for perpetuating it, this needs to be changed," she added.

Moving on to the question of abortion, she expressed her grave concern saying "like the neighbouring country India where amniocentesis has been introduced, women may be forced to abort girl children, as Bangladesh is currently witnessing a mushroom of MR clinics."

Referring to the constitutional provision, Sigma Huda maintained that Article 27 of the constitution guaranteed equality, while Article 28 exemplified discrimination and suggested enacting any law for bridging the gap.

"Whether you have access to law or not is the prime concern," she added.

Referring to the Article 15 of the constitution, which urges for compulsory education and the government's present policy, which provides a girl child with free education up to class eight, she asked whether free education was the only answer.

"Without a private tutor a student cannot think of pursuing his/her education," she said adding that this was also true even in the rural areas.

Talking about the curriculum and the contents of the text books in schools she observed that they did not reflect the issues of human rights and gender awareness.

"So the offsprings are being brought up without the proper knowledge and grow up with all kinds of misconceptions," she added.

Referring to the early marriage of the girl child Huda said that the intention of our society is that girls should be married off as soon as possible while there is no urgency for marriage for the boy child.

"There is no police to enforce the law, when a girl child below the age of eighteen is being forced to sexual intercourse, as desired by her husband, although the section 13 of the pe-

nal code has clearly said that such an act is "prohibited by law", said the advocate and termed it 'marital rape'.

Leading the discussion on the legal side, Advocate Huda stressed the need for uniform family code, applicable for all religions, including the Muslims and the Hindus.

"I prefer better standards, to remaining at the minimum level", saying so she stressed the need for changing the prevalent inheritance law.

She informed that there existed a good number of different schools of thought regarding inheritance in Shariah law and some of them were better than those of the Hanifis.

She criticised the arguments put forward by the fundamentalists, who say that the women are getting wealth from both the husband and the parents.

"They have forgotten that men are also inheriting both from the parents and wives", she argued.

She said that in the case of inheriting the wealth, the law was biased, as the wife inherits one-eighth of the husband's property, while the husband inherits one-fourth of the wife's.

Commenting on the issue of marriage registration she felt that more Quazis (marriage registrars) should be appointed with proper knowledge of the laws.

"But the Quazis are fighting for more areas on remaining the same," she pointed out.

"Most of the Quazis do not go for knowing whether the girl has consented or not, while registering a marriage", she

added. She also said that most of the marriages were taking place without any registration whatsoever. She further informed that there was no effective system of birth registration.



"We have the inheritance law, but for a family which has only girl children, the law makes little or no sense at all; these children cannot inherit the property of their father."

Rokia Rahman

Rokia Rahman, one of the leading women entrepreneurs of the country, while expressing her concern for the girl-child of



Photo: UNICEF

Bangladesh highlighted a few important and basic issues regarding their future. The inheritance law, the dowry problem and the credit problem women in the business world face at every step, were some of the major concerns for Rahman.

Even though these were the burning issues clouding the girl-child's future and also the most talked about problems, the solutions given by the law-makers and the path finders of the country were not being implemented properly in every sphere of real life, she said. "There should also be a solution chalked out to enforce these laws," Rokia insisted.

"We have the inheritance law, but for a family which has only girl children, the law makes little or no sense at all; these children cannot inherit the property of their father," said Rahman adding "I think if the government could change the family ordinance and family laws that we have, and allow the girl child to inherit, then their future could be ensured."

Working in the grassroots level with labourers and their family members of her cold storage in Munshiganj and Bikrampur Rokia has been familiar with their day to day problems. According to her own evaluation and opinion dowry was another big problem faced by the parents of any marriageable girl child. For them a girl becomes eligible for marriage at a tender age of 16 sometimes even 13. Rahman mentioned there have been television advertisements, posters, placards, rallies and seminars against dowry, but all to deaf-ears. In rural areas, the father of the groom still demands dowry and the father of the bride still succumbs to his demands, no law has even helped in the final moments. "Dowry is a rampant practice in rural Bangladesh, although we have made progress in the education and health sectors but the dowry problem continues to loom large; there is legislation but its always hard to break customs and traditions," she said.

"These are landless poor farmers who find it necessary to get their daughters married off. They go from door step to door step begging or asking for money to help raise the 'desired' amount. Sometimes they collect hundred sometimes two hundred until they have a substantial amount of ten or five thousand; and that is only the dowry money besides other wedding expenses."

"I have been talking against

this to them, everytime they come to me for the final amount, I have tried to stop it but all in vain, they say that since no ministers or politicians and leaders could stop it, how could I bring an end to it," said Rahman.

It is the basic attitude towards girl child, that should change, they should not be considered as liabilities only, said Rahman. Today in this fast growing world women have entered every profession and have also showed promising signs, then why this discriminations, this inequality? she asked.

Women in the business world were one of Rokia's main priority concerns. "We at MIDAS have tried to recognize the fact that women did not have collateral and they could not come to business, because every bank needed collateral; so we have started a programme where we are giving some loans without collateral," she informed. At MIDAS these women meet every two weeks to discuss their problems and business. Through these discussions they have found that when women inherit property and when they ask for their share, the answer is very shocking. "How can you, a woman ask for your share?" They think that she should give up her share for her brothers and not ask for it. This is also happening in the urban areas," said Rokia expressing her concern.



"Mass awareness of the problems regarding the girl child would improve the situation"

Rolf C Carriere

UNICEF Resident Representative to Bangladesh Rolf C Carriere observed that the problems of the girl child

generally was viewed superficially and emphasised the need for looking into the matters more deeply in order to find solutions.

He said the statistics of the country drew a partial picture of the reality for the organisations involved with development works.

"We have statistics on higher percentage of illiteracy, malnutrition, mortality rate as a result of pregnancy — but some things still remain missing there," the UNICEF Representative said.

He opined that these problems would never be solved unless the development agents investigated the deeper causes of the problems and worked out the solutions accordingly.

"Our thinking on the problematic issues should change, otherwise there will be continued child labour or hunger in this country for a longer period," Rolf said.

The UNICEF representative pointed out, that many of the problems originated from the psychological set-up of the people.

"The psychology of the people should be understood first," he said and added, psychological difference between the people in general and the development agents always acted as a barrier for the intended development.

Without making the people understand what their problems were and consequences of a particular development activity, the problems would continue to prevail, said Carriere.

Carriere emphasized the need for dialogue with the grassroots people, village and community leaders and particularly the sufferers, the girl children.

Bangladesh and other countries having such large populations should not ignore its human resources and should engage them directly with the development process, the UNICEF representative said.

Regarding the health sector, Rolf said, a significant number of women died every year due to complications arising from pregnancy. "Perhaps", he said, "if men were pregnant in this country — the problem would have been solved much earlier."

"It is notable, that Bangladesh has a woman Prime Minister," Rolf said; "yet, such women's problems remain to be redressed."

The UNICEF representative again blamed the psychological set up of the society for keeping such problems alive. He observed, since men were running

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A Girl Child is Less Privileged both Inside and Outside the Home