

# We Have Many Good Laws, but They are Never Implemented



Photo: Shehzad Noorani

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the administration, they did not share the women's problem. "Had they been a part of the problem, it would have been focussed strongly," Rolf added.

He expressed his view that mass awareness of the problems regarding the girl child would improve the situation. He underlined the role of the mass media in this regard as the catalyst.

"The mass media could play a role in shifting these perceptions to the peoples' minds," he said.

Rolf further added, in Bangladesh, maternal death was not taken very seriously. "The health system, in particular, is not friendly to maternity," the UNICEF representative said. "Many women die annually due to lack of obstetrics and gynaecological facilities at the medicare centres spreading around the country."

Other than these facilities the absence of adequate number of doctors at the district, thana and union level medicare units, should also be blamed for the death during pregnancy and giving birth to a child.

The UNICEF representative stressed the need for bigger investment in the health sector and increase of the number of doctors and medical equipment.



**"A girl child outside parental care remains more vulnerable to social injustice"**

**Helen Rahman**

Helen Rahman, Coordinator, Shaishab, a non-governmental organisation that works for street children of the city, reiterated the need for maximum security for the street children, specially the girl child who remains exposed to all kinds of social evils and prejudices.

"We have divided the child population of the city in two gross categories. Children within parental care and children without parental care. The second category, children outside parental care, is again divided into two groups. Child population that are left out in the streets from the visible group and children, working as domestic servants at the various city houses from the invisible groups," Helen explains.

Children who live outside parental care, specially the girl child, remains exposed to various social evils like sexual exploitation, prostitution and various Sexually Transmitted Diseases (STDs).

As Helen Rahman sees it, "Girls out side family care, those who remains out into the street, become easy victims of rape and prostitution, from where they are infected with various venereal diseases."

Even among the invisible group of homeless girl children who work as domestic maid servants at various city households often become victims of physical and sexual abuse, rape etc, stress Rahman.

She pointed out the problem

of marriage, many social taboos and prejudices to be the cause why these hapless children cannot be rehabilitated in the society which finally results in a high turnover of under aged floating prostitutes each year and as these increasing number of prostitutes are left without proper medical care or guidance, the threat of an outbreak of a deadly disease like AIDS cannot be ruled out by any chance.

"Because of our social embargoes or taboos on matters such as sexual relations, rapes, and prostitutions, most of these enormous problems go unaddressed," claims Helen and further adds by saying, "Thinking of the social stigma and the social cost one has to pay for matters such as these, many cases of rapes and sexual abuses inflicted on a girl child go unreported."

For this, there is probably, no other remedy but to broaden our views and perspectives on issues such as these and there should also be a promise of rehabilitation of the victimised child, so that she doesn't feel threatened to report any cases of violence or abuse against her.

But as long as our social perspective on matter such as these are not altered, much of a change cannot be expected. Not shying away from it, but getting to bottom of the matter may be of some help, if not the total remedy, explained Helen Rahman.



**130 million children in the world have no access to school. A large section of them being girls.**

**Mehr Khan**

Mehr Khan, a UNICEF executive in New York, said that women themselves were often responsible for perpetuating discrimination between the boy and girl child. As mothers, they perpetuate the same discriminatory stereotypes between boys and girls.

Referring to the speech of Nargis Jahan Banu, she said not only does the male member of the family discriminate against their girl children but also women have a tendency to favour their sons.

Quoting the World Children Report 1992, Mehr said that one million children die annually in three countries of this region.

She also said that 130 million children in the world have no access to school. A large section of them being girls.

"Girls are less interested to go to school and sometimes the parents mostly of the rural areas discourage their daughters to go to school," she said.

Mehr pointed out that it was probably because the parents thought that educating their daughters would be an added burden.

She said that abortions were rampant in this region, to avoid the birth of unwanted children, most of whom were girl children.

Referring to a survey report she said that 8,000 abortions were carried out in a South Asian city in which all but one of the aborted were girls.

She also said that the attitude towards the girl child should be changed by creating awareness.

Mehr Khan said that there are laws but there is no practice of those laws.

Khan emphasised the need of holding more of such roundtable discussions to exchange opinions among the experts and campaigners in the region.

"We need to have such discussion in every country," she added.



**The unhealthy and unhygienic condition that perpetrated in most of the urban slums, were a constant threat, not only to its dwellers, but to the whole city in general.**

**Dr. Naila Khan**

Dr Naila Khan, a pediatrician and Associate Professor of Shishu Hospital, stressed the urgent need for free access to health and medical information, especially for the benefit of the girl child. "Various restrictions on the free flow of medical information are keeping most of our female population in a state of ignorance; restrictions imposed in the name of taboos and various societal rules have to be removed because this state of ignorance is leaving a serious dent on the overall female health scenario all over the country," she said.

To improve the status of the girl child in our country we have to take into perspectives the development of the girl child as a whole, she maintained.

"The girl child goes through various critical phases in her life: a girl going through her puberty, especially, should be given attention because it is her adolescence that forms her physical, emotional, behavioural and sexual growth," explained Naila. But girls going through this age in our country she added, were considered as adults which, of course, they were not. "Their intellectual faculty remains in a state of plasticity, almost as a child's," she said.

"As doctors, said Naila, "we are not at full liberty to discuss the matters of sexuality, acts of sexuality, menstruation, abortion, pregnancy with our girl patients who are only going through their puberty; but this information are quite vital for them because ignorance can lead to many unpleasant occurrences."

As most of our girls are still wedded off in their mid-teens, said Dr Khan, "We also have to address the newly-weds and young mothers along with the girl child because, in our country most women die due to complications arising out of early pregnancies and inadequate obstetrics and gynecological facilities. So, they have to be made well aware of the probable problems that can take place during the period of pregnancy. And they will also have to be taught how to cope with such eventualities."

But for this to work out, says the Doctor, "there had to be a

proper network among the professionals who were dealing with such issues. More interaction was therefore needed since without a properly chalked out and coordinated planning, a massive task could not be carried out, she said.

Contrary to the existing belief that the common people were least bothered to know about basic health, Naila mentioned that, "We undertook a programme — Our Body, Our Soul — It was an initiative to reach the grassroots people, especially the women and inform them about the basic medical knowledge and one might be thrilled to know that it pulled immense grassroots attention."

One area that still needed to be strongly addressed, Dr Khan believed, was the urban slums. The unhealthy and unhygienic condition that perpetrated in most of the urban slums, were a constant threat, not only to its dwellers, but to the whole city in general. The prospect of any fatal disease taking an epidemic form from there cannot altogether be ruled out.

She later referred to a survey: "We had conducted a survey on the Agargaon slum areas near the Shishu Hospital once. The unhealthy condition that prevails throughout these slums are quite horrifying. The dwellers in these slums are not even marginally equipped with basic health care know-hows. All living there, especially, the children and young mothers run the high risk of contracting any fatal disease from there. So there is an utmost need for addressing this issue."

As any conscious citizen would be, Dr Naila Khan, too, felt relieved that with the stepping up of the immunization programme child mortality in this country has marked a sharp fall now, than five years ago. "But needs of the girl child should now be strongly addressed so that she has an equal chance of growing up as a healthy citizen. An open-door health information flow may save many young mothers from early pregnancy related casualties and others from several unwanted fatal feminine diseases," concluded Naila Khan.



**What was needed was a sensitive campaign to raise the issue of child abuse and make people aware and acknowledge the problem.**

**Ruby Ghuznavi**

Ruby Ghuznavi representing an organisation for rural and urban children of Bangladesh said that her main concern was the sexual abuse of girl children whether it was within the family or household or on the way to school or in people's homes where they worked as domestic servants.

"While the west was just starting to articulate on this subject," she said "we on this side of the globe have no system at all to address the issues." Ghuznavi added that what was needed was a sensitive campaign to raise the issue of child abuse and make people aware and acknowledge the problem.

She cited the example of rural areas where many rape cases included girls as young as nine or twelve being raped by school going boys. "This does not mean that these things happen only among the poor,"

said Ghuznavi, "It also happens even in middle class families."

Ghuznavi went on to explain that while working with street children in urban areas, the main resistance that Terre Des Hommes workers had to confront involving the girls was from the pimps who were making money off the girl children through prostitution and so were controlling them.

So far Terre Des Hommes has tried to rehabilitate a number of these children by educating them and finding employment for them in garment factories. Regarding the latter, Ghuznavi pointed out that while the Harkin Bill was aimed at saving children, the makers of the bill should also know that those children who will be out of work as a result of the bill, will go back to trafficking and prostitution.

Touching upon the subject of violence against women, Ghuznavi mentioned that there were existing in Bangladesh recent statistics on this subject but the data was not widely circulated and available to the general public. Ghuznavi added that data such as in the form of country reports were never discussed and so were of little use.

"The media, she said, "can make this information available to us so that we can respond to issues like infant mortality, violence against women or against girl children."



**While the boys were given time for schooling and games, the girl child was mostly confined to domestic chores.**

**Razia Ismail**

Representative from New Delhi UNICEF, Razia Ismail expressed her feelings that the girl child in the sub-continent grew up in a negative environment which she identified as the main set back of the development of the girl child.

"The girl child in her growing years learns to become powerless," Razia said, "with a negative self image — the text books which she studies, can do very little to the child's mind."

A girl child was taken care of by the parents in a view that one day she would be married off to a man and she would leave the parents home. So education was only secondary to her training to become a good housewife, Razia observed.

While the boys were given time for schooling and games, the girl child was mostly confined to domestic chores.

Culturally, the girl child has been treated to become subservient to a man. In all aspects, she does not consider herself a human being first; She is even oriented to the fact that her right to ownership of property is less than that of a man, Ismail said.

Eventually, the girl learns to treat herself as an inferior human being and she retards her own development. Razia Ismail stressed the need for minimizing the inherent disparity of women in the culture of the sub-continent. She also emphasized changing the health, education and social-education systems which always provided facilities especially to men.

"The negative mind-set of the women has got nothing to do with the government policy," the UNICEF representative pointed out, "so the changes should be

made radically in the attitude of the socio-cultural and political field."

But, the traditional system of the society was resistant to any change favouring the development of women, Razia Ismail observed.

"Who is going to change the traditional infrastructure of the sub-continent?" Razia raising a question, expressed her observation that the society did not even permit raising a question on the rights of a woman or a girl child.

Razia felt that the issue of a girl child and a woman could not completely be separated and pointed out that disparity of the girl-child in the society could be reduced if problems relating exclusively to women were solved.

Regarding the health issue, she observed that in terms of legislation, health issues were hard to change in favour of women as the health sector, by legislation, was not gender-biased. "But in practical fields," she said, "the health facilities are denied to the girl children."

Health and education facilities for the girl child should be specific and integrated, Razia suggested adding that girls under the age of 5, needed one type of health and education facilities while those between the age of 6 and 11 needed different facilities.



**Laws of the land must guarantee social and economic security to the womenfolk. A congenial atmosphere was needed for enabling women to carry out their social responsibilities.**

**Ahmedullah Miah**

UCEP Director Ahmedullah Miah identified 'social classification' as the principal reason behind the discrimination between the girl and boy child.

According to Miah, the 'bitter classification' in our social structure was impeding the creation of an atmosphere of parity among the sexes.

Miah, who is also the chairperson of the Dhaka-based Shishu Adhikar Forum (a body on child rights), shared all other views regarding the discrepancies except the claim that families always adopted a negative attitude towards their girl children.

"I don't agree that all parents neglect their girl children. ... They (girls) are usually well taken care of and are no less attended", he said.

In support of his view, Miah told the gathering that he himself always paid equal attention to all his children irrespective of their gender.

The UCEP Director, who studied sociology, felt that a holistic view was needed to analyse the gamut of social factors responsible for discrimination between the sexes and to find out solutions.

The girl child is most vulnerable in the present social set-up and susceptible to discrimination by design or default more often than a child of the opposite sex, he said.

The Shishu Adhikar Forum Chief blamed the parents as well as various social forces including the ruling class for their ignorance and apathy towards the factors responsible

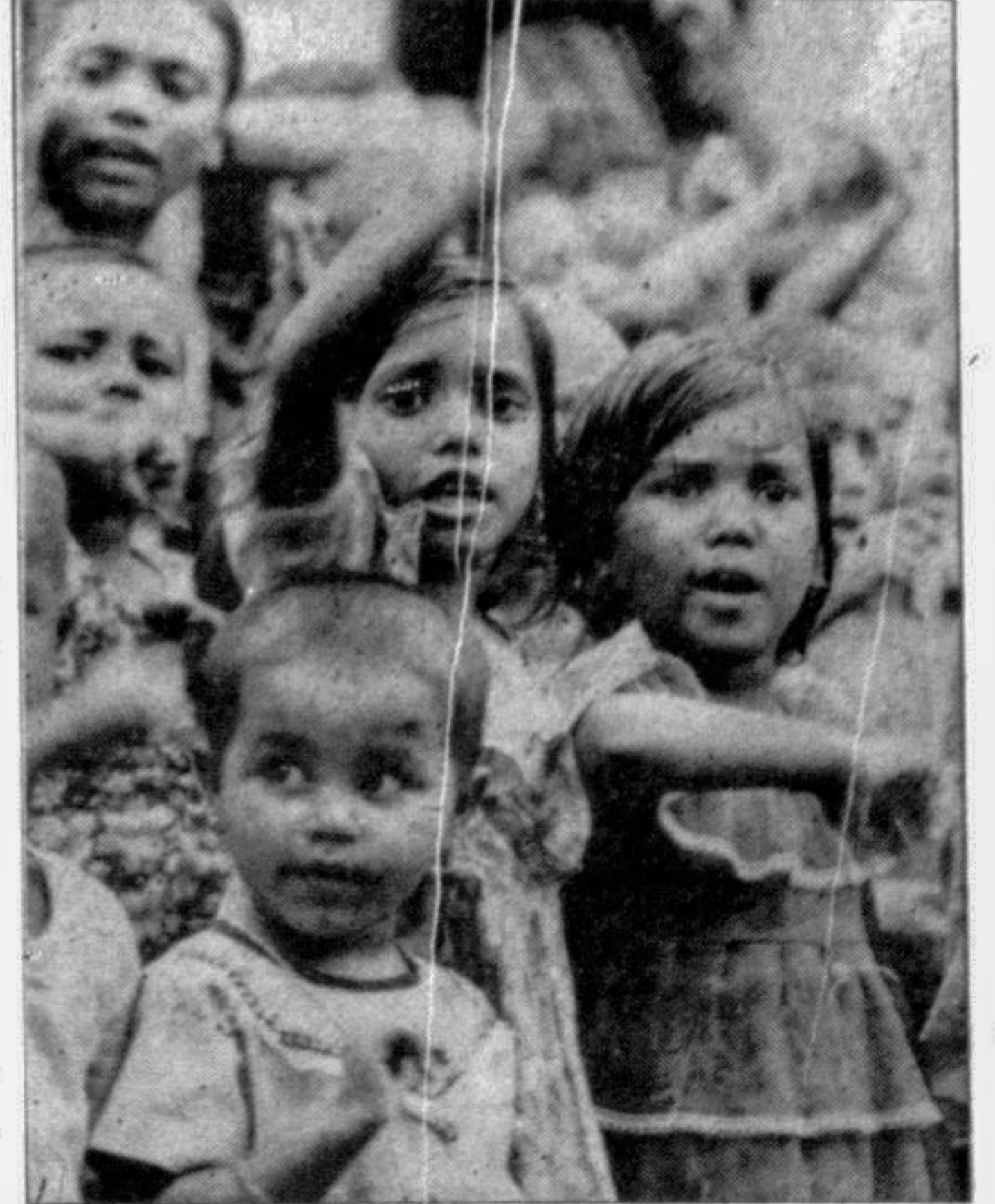


Photo: Shehzad Noorani

for the deprivation of the female community.

About the legal aspect, Miah felt the laws of the land must guarantee social and economic security to the womenfolk. A congenial atmosphere was needed for enabling women to carry out their social responsibilities, he said.

He also felt that most religious edicts were intended to ensure the well-being of the society, but these were often misinterpreted or even abused to serve vested interests and consequently had a negative impact on the girl child.



**All classes of people, whether middle, lower-middle or poor, must try and make the girl-child feel important and not be stuck with the obsession that only a son is welcome in the family.**

**Nargis Jahan Banu**

Nargis Jahan Banu, video coordinator from Proshika Unnayan Kendro, introduced

herself as specially working with video films. She said, "In our patriarchal society the girl is not an important member of the family. Our mothers think that the son is the 'sun' as he will look after the mother's needs when the father dies. The daughter is expected to confine herself to her in-law's family. Only yesterday we read about the death of a female magistrate. If the male magistrate who stabbed her really loved her he would not have done what he did. He simply wanted to selfishly assert his male superiority. There are many ways in which Islam can be interpreted. We can make changes in the laws such as that of inheritance. Men are allowed to marry four times and this rule again should be changed."

Nargis Jahan Banu, like the rest of the speakers at the conference stressed on the need of greater awareness among the people of the rights and the welfare of the girl child. "Only awareness about the girl-child can remove prejudice and ensure the future of the young girl, who will later be the mother and guide of the family," she said.

She insisted that all classes of people, whether middle, lower-middle or poor, must try and make the girl-child feel important and not be stuck with the obsession that only a son is welcome in the family. People have to stop feeling that girls are a burden and who are destined to spend a major part of their life in the in-law's home, she added.

"We have to change the attitude otherwise a large percentage of our population will suffer as females make a sizeable part of the population. The existing laws have to be altered and the rights of the daughters should be ensured, even though there might be sons in the family. The

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**List of Participants**

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- |   |   |
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| 5. Dr Ahmedullah Miah<br>Director, UCEP &<br>Chairperson, Shishu<br>Adhikar Forum, Dhaka.   | 14. Rolf C Carriere<br>Unicef Representative<br>Bangladesh.                         |
| 6. Nargis Jahan Banu<br>Video Coordinator<br>PROSHIKA, Dhaka.                               | 15. Mehr Khan<br>Director, Information<br>Unicef, New York<br>U. S. A.              |
| 7. Ruby Ghuznavi, Advisor<br>Terre Des Hommes<br>Switzerland.                               | 16. Purification<br>Quisumbing<br>Unicef, Bangkok<br>Thailand.                      |
| 8. Khurshid Ertan Ahmed<br>Director Project HELP<br>Ain-o-Shalish Kendra                    | 17. Razia Ismail<br>Unicef<br>New Delhi<br>India.                                   |
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Star Photo

**We must Change the Social Attitude which Assigns Inferior Status to Girls**