

A Girl, from Day-one, is Looked Upon as a Burden

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 girl-child is just as much an individual as her brother and in ensuring a brighter future for her we are only making sure that the nation as a whole has something to look forward to. In doing this we might follow what is being done in the more progressive Muslim countries, who do not feel that they have side stepped from the teachings of Islam in giving the female members of the family a larger share of comforts and funds that are available to the family. Thus when the inheritance law is seen and scrutinised, there should be equal provisions for both the boy and the girl in the family. A girl child can bring just as much of happiness and contentment to the family as the sons. Thus a daughter can be a credit to the family name while the sons may be average individuals who may not be of the same consequence as the grown up daughter who brings fame and fortune to the family as a teacher or a doctor," she said.

Nargis Banu felt that sometimes there have been misinterpretations of the Holy Quran. She said that there were many quotations of the holy book that needs to be revalued in the modern day and age. She added that there were repeated discriminations against women such as when "Imams" insist that four marriages are quite legal without mentioning that all the wives have to be treated equally. Thus she insisted that some of the sayings of the Holy Quran need to be revalued in the interest of the girl-child.



Photo: Shehzad Noorani



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Khurshid Erfan Ahmed
 Khurshid Erfan Ahmed, literary material developer of Alin-O-Salish Kendra, stressed the need for educating the girl child and bringing about an end to the existing gender disparity. Ahmed's main concern is to make the lives of girl children better. A girl child, is always regarded as the unwanted one, and removing this 'unwantedness' therefore is very important.

HELP the acronym of Health, Education and Legal Protection, a low-key project that Ahmed is involved with, is actually a drop-in centre which receives working children specially girls recently sacked from garment factories. It offers education of various types and counselling. This drop-in centre which was once a proper project when funds were available, has held many workshops and provided shelter arrangements, is now basically engaged in trying to educate street girls.

The priority concern that I would pick up now is the disparity in gender in terms of educational needs. Actually I do not see any point in blaming our men particularly, but certainly the social structures which have created two different beings like men and women; I mean apart from the biological differences, we are getting differences from our text books, so lets go back to the primary text books and see what NCTB (National Curriculum Text Board) is doing," Ahmed declared. She believed that by making opportunities for continued text revision, not only would the negative female images be wiped out but some kind of 'secularism, some kind of socialist feminism could be brought into text books'.

Through this children at a very tender age would learn to respect each other as human beings. NCTB has now revised the texts to bring about certain gender equality but even then the messages haven't quite sunk in because it depends on the people, assigned to revise these texts. How liberal are they to prevent this gender blindness, asked Ahmed.

"Of course, there are laws, relating to child's marriage or working children, and some of these laws are very advanced in our country and some still to catch up but it's the organizations of people who claim to be activists as well as researchers who should always be networking with bigger organizations to lead campaigns for the equality between the girl child and the boy child in education," Ahmed said adding "in the educational area, Bangladesh has been do-

ing quite well during the last 10 years than many neighbouring countries; there's been a positive change and there should not be any gloomy or depressed impression about it." Ahmed commented that, a child's mind was simple and fresh, "like clay, you can mould it anyway you like; telling them about poverty, burdening them with a sense of sorrow and unhappiness makes no sense to them."

Khurshid added that they should just be treated as children and be educated. Madrasas, Maktabas, NGO schools, UCEP, Gano Shahajjo Kendra and many of the 133 NGOs were working very positively in this sector. Ahmed felt that there was a great deal of promise, the government having opened its eyes to the legal system. Ahmed also pointed out the popularity of religious education in Bangladesh "Graduating in religious studies is different, yet parents prefer this very much," she said. From 6 in the morning the classes start and by 8 am, the Maktabas class are over, the whole day is then free for the girl child to do her other household chores. This is what the people believe in. Arabic and Urdu, which they believe to be the language of religion, is taught, and gives a sense of alienation; it gives us the idea of living in two different worlds, Ahmed said.

Ahmed stressed that effective plans, strategies, and incentives be properly chalked out post-literacy library, satellite schools were important too, but above all, the girl child should be protected through proper education. "Pretty girls selling flowers in front of big hotels are exposed to many dangerous threats," Ahmed added. "They are left unprotected and the pimps of that area engaged them in flesh trade, sometimes even to foreign clients, which ultimately leads to their trafficking."

Ahmed suggested that there should be more discussions where ideas on improving their status should be generated. The media especially, should promote their cause and put forward suggestions for ameliorating their condition for inclusion in future government policy formulation. These subjects should be brought before the public eye for its appraisal because some how the public always misses what the government intends to do.



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Maheen Sultan
 Maheen Sultan of the Grameen Bank suggested that girl children be groomed as productive members of their respective families in order to spare them the types of repression they were experiencing un-

der the present social conditions. She believed that any or all discriminatory attitude towards the girls would automatically go away if the girl children were grown as self-sufficient or earning members of a family. This would also make them worthy citizens of the country, she said.

Regarding the laws relating to women's rights, Sultan regretted that although there were laws and regulations in favour of women's rights, yet those were not always adequately enforced. In most cases, she said, women subjected to oppression failed to seek recourse or redress under the appropriate laws mainly because of ignorance, poverty and, above all, their pitiable age-old position of subjugation in society.

The Grameen Bank official told the round-table that her bank was encouraging the women borrowers so that they could participate in the productive and development-oriented activities and thus fight against exploitation. She also proposed drawing up plans to help the girls to educate themselves while lessening their dependence on the parents. She said they could do this by taking part in various income-generating activities. In this context, she appreciated the government's 'food for education' programme which, she said, would encourage the parents to send their girls to school.

Maheen Sultan strongly criticised child marriage and the dowry system, saying these practices were only helping the parents to 'sell out' their daughters, which again was the result of deep-seated negative, unjust attitudes towards the girls.



Photo: UNICEF

TABOO	CONSEQUENCES OF VIOLATION
Menstruating girl must not step over a hole made by a crab or a snake.	Profuse bleeding
Menstruating girl should not eat egg.	Egg like growth in the cervix
Menstruating girl should not eat beef and big fish.	(if beef) will make her too hot (if fish) menstrual blood will smell fishy.
Menstruating girl should not move alone on midday or at twilight.	May be possessed by ghost
The polluted girl should not plant trees, sow seeds.	Vegetation will not grow.



"Those in power will not give up what they have to change the status quo or laws, such as the inheritance law, to benefit the girl child."

Sayeeda Anis
 BRAC's Sayeeda Anis, who has been looking after the curriculum unit of the NFPE programme, mentioned in her opening statement that the programme's prime concern was to facilitate the girl child. The first concern of the programme she said was to make the girl child literate and numerate not only for the three years but beyond, so that the girl children stayed on to finish school. Anis pointed out the need to create interest among the girl children so that they can hold on to what they have learnt.

Anis also added that it was not enough for the girl child to know how to read and write; the programme, therefore, makes sure that the girl children get information on how to maintain their health.

NFPE's third concern, said Anis, was to reverse the negative image of the girl child and consequently the woman. In this respect said Anis the major obstacle was the attitude of the male. She suggested an intervention that would result in men changing the way they behave towards their wives and their daughters. This attitudinal change would, therefore, have a positive effect on the girl child.

On the legal issues concerning the girl child, Anis said that a cost benefit analysis of legal aspects was very important to determine who will gain and who will lose as a result of the laws in question. "Those in power will not give up what they have to change the status quo or laws, such as the inheritance law, to benefit the girl child."

On education, Anis said there was very little debate on the need for education but there was considerable debate on how to educate children, where to educate, who to educate, etc. Anis, however, pointed out that it was very encouraging that Bangladesh now has a compulsory education law.

Anis explained that BRAC's nonformal system focussed mainly on 8-9 year old girl children and its objective has been not just literacy and numeracy but to provide the child with an all-round education in a kind of holistic approach. She said that although the NFPE system was not a complete system, it provided the basic elements of education.

"If you look at the figures you will see that at any given time from 3 to 5 million children are unserved," said Anis. The government she added, was not equipped to serve this number so it was up to the non-formal or private sector to ensure that children were learning what they want to learn. She mentioned that in the NFPE system, parents tell the school instructor what they want their children to learn and how they want them taught. "They tell us how we can help them," she added.

Another hot topic of the round-table discussion was the health of the girl child. On this, Anis said it was very important to focus on the health of adolescent girls who "fall through the crack most often". Anis mentioned that by providing them with basic health education and practical experience such as immunization and growth monitoring, girl children could be better equipped to take care of their own health.

Anis also pointed out the importance of addressing the nutritional needs of girl children. In this respect BRAC has started a programme that will help children to satisfy their own nutritional requirements. This included initiating girls and boys between nine and fourteen to grow fruits and vegetables around their homes for their own and family consumption. The main idea behind this being to boost home consumption instead of growing food for the market only.

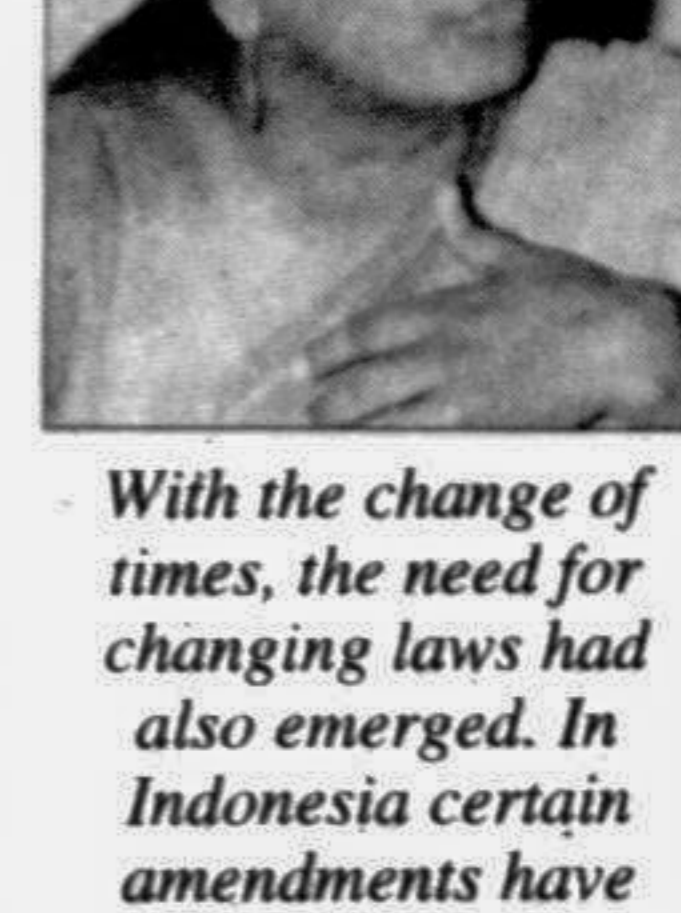
Anis also stressed the importance of addressing the educational needs of older girl children who either drop out of government schools or just cannot go to school for some other reason. These girls who are married off when they are barely in their teens become out of touch with education.

In this case, said Anis, the reading centres established by BRAC have been successful. These centres, Anis added, help to generate a habit of keeping in touch with books to retain whatever they have learnt before.

"These are efforts that are close to their lives, not something they cannot relate to," commented Anis. They would provide a solution to the problem of alienation so common among children.

Anis also said that these efforts have had positive effects on the girl child; many girls have gone on to secondary schools and come back to the NFPE schools as teachers, through the practical education provided, girl children have been able to implement their learning in raising their own families; and in terms of gender differences, a few girls have started to send their daughters to school and become part of samities.

"We all know what the needs are, but we have to keep in mind that we must do what is practical, given the circumstances," she concluded.



With the change of times, the need for changing laws had also emerged. In Indonesia certain amendments have been made to curtail second marriages.

Ferdous Azim
 Ferdous Azim, the representative from Naripakkha, while expressing her concern over the girl child Azim mainly focussed on the educational needs and sexual exploitation of the girl child. She identified a process of discrimination that comes into play with the very birth of the girl child.

"Our families are yet to accept a newborn girl child willingly," the social worker observed. This has tremendous impact — both physical and psychological — on the growth of the girl child.

A girl child faces the problem of being a girl even in her school, Azim noted.

The government and the NGOs are working to inspire sending girls off to schools but the initiative lacks proper follow-up, she conceded, saying that the primary emphasis should be on establishing a girl child as an integral part of the society.

Referring to the sexual abuse problem, that was raised on the table, Azim said the girl child, for that matter a woman, was not only a victim of sexual abuse but also of the behavioural pattern shaped by the influence of society and educational institutions.

where such uniform laws had experienced resistance from the minority communities. Underlining the need to set up a law regardless of sex, race and creed, Azim called upon all to think women as part of a nation. She also drew attention of the assembled social workers to the existing disparity in Sharia and Dewani on civil laws.

Article 27 of the Constitution — that promises equality to all citizens — is being contradicted by the presence of these self-contradictory laws. She observed that there is immense scope for modification of the existing laws.

With the change of times, the need for changing laws had also emerged. In Indonesia certain amendments have been made to curtail second marriages. Such amendments, brought in 1952, were done with the consent of the Muslim religious leaders of Indonesia, Azim informed. Taking the ever-increasing population rate, marital problems and other related issues into consideration, Azim seemed optimistic about similar amendments in Bangladesh. "Our religious leaders, too, are aware of the problems created by multi-marriages and they sure would like to see an end of the problems," she said.

Replying to a query of the moderator of the round-table, Mahfus Anam, Azim admitted that all the marriages are not duly registered. The Kazi offices which record the weddings lack coordination. Thus often a man can hide the fact of his marriage, and marry again, the participants were told.

The organisations working for similar goals — women's and children's rights and a better life for the women, especially — were united in their efforts. Azim said in reply to another of Anam's questions.

Azim informed the participants that the social workers meet often and share ideas about their strategies for improving the lifestyle of women and children.

Talking on the health issue, raised by Associate Professor of the Shishu Hospital Dr Naila Khan, the representative from Naripakkha emphasised the need for developing values among girl children. Recalling Begum Rokeya Sakhawat's achievements, Azim said she had shown what a girl's role should be in the development of the society.

"A girl should be valued by the contribution she makes to the society," she added.



"The girl child should know about her rights."

Dr Purification Quisumbing
 Dr Quisumbing, in her opening statement, said the most important theme that should be discussed was the Universal Ratification of the Convention of the Rights of the Child. This would be the greatest tool for approaching the problems regarding the girl child. "The girl child should know about her rights," she said. Unicef, she added, has been working very hard for universal ratification. Bangladesh has also ratified the convention.

Turning to gender issues, especially as seen by the Unicef, Dr Quisumbing enumerated some of them. These included i) ensuring equal nurturing, nutritional, educational and health care for boys and girls; ii) establishing a minimum legal age at which girls can marry; iii) gathering statistical data of the situation of women and girls and their contribution to the economy and well being; iv) reducing the labour burden of girls who invariably work longer hours than boys; and v) combating sexual and other forms of exploitation of girls who, at adolescence, face the added risk of HIV infection and therefore AIDS related illnesses.

"I think we should bear in mind and keep close at heart one of the most fundamental principles of the Convention of the Rights of the Child in Article 2 which prohibits discrimination, especially discrimination against the girl child," she said.

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A Situation of Acute Malnutrition is Far Worse for Girls