

Mass Media should Do More to Raise Public Awareness about Problems of Girl Child

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 Quisumbing, who is a lawyer herself, later focussed on the legal aspects and questioned whether Bangladesh had made a report to the community on the rights of the child. One requirement she emphasized was to harmonize relevant laws with the principles of the convention. The laws should set minimum universal norms. "It will be interesting to see how much in line they are with Article 2," she commented.

Quisumbing stressed the role of the media. "The preparation of the report should be with the participation of the community and should be known by everyone through the media," she added.

She also wanted to know the effect of having a woman head of state in Bangladesh on improving the situation of the girl child. Regarding this, Quisumbing pointed out that in her own country the Philippines, the presence of a woman head of state had a positive impact in that it established the principle of non-discrimination.



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Therese Blanchet

Ms Therese Blanchet introduced herself as a social anthropologist, who had been doing research for many years in Bangladesh. Speaking of her personal experience, she said, "At present I am working in a 'basti' whose name I do not wish to mention. Helen Rahman talked of the girl child in the street. The 'basti' girl is of a different type. In the east the family is usually looked after in an effective way. In general, in the 'basti' we find that the family comprises mother, children,

and the powerless father — who cannot provide adequately, and a child of 10 is not protected in such an atmosphere."

"Since the family members — the father, mother or elder children — cannot protect the daughter she must marry early," she continued. "The parents do not arrange the daughter's marriage. The girl has no choice but to marry so that she is at the mercy of one man rather than many, which would be the case if she takes to the life of prostitution. Why isn't a girl treated as a human being? She is sexually harassed both inside marriage and outside it."

She added, "The debate of legal issue brings in the question — can the law be changed? If a law is passed this does not ensure that it will be implemented. Islam has many interpretations and a number of things which are unacceptable to women are done in the name of Islam. In the patriarchal society in Bangladesh the woman has to serve her in-laws, even though there are differences of the extent of service to be given to the in-laws in different social strata. It is said that laws are not implemented due to poverty. The girls of the middle class are even more suppressed than in the 'basti'. If a girl goes astray in the middle-class she is punished more severely."

Later in the discussion she continued, "You have commented about the lack of information of the 'bastis'. One thing that strikes me is that most of the women are the real earners. The men have many wives as the rickshawwallas marry at least twice and live off their wives. There is a definite difference between the 'basti' women and those that come from the rural area. Women of the 'basti' marry early, and always provide for the children. They are often compelled to go to work and leave their children to beg. The girl child realises much earlier than girls from richer societies that they must earn a living and cannot rely on men to look after them," said Blanchet.

Blanchet added, "Men earn twice as much as women and spend only 60% of their earning on their family. If they gamble and have more than one wife, which is often the case, they provide for even a lesser portion of the housekeeping money. The richer people in the vicinity look down on the 'basti' women as it is believed by many in their neighbourhood that they are dirty and cannot say their prayers. They are mistakenly termed as outsiders and condemned as not even being Muslims."



Star Photo



Star Photo



Photo: UNICEF

Towards 2000: Development through Gender Equality

The Action Plan for the Girl Child builds on the base provided by the Fourth Five-Year Plan and will feed into the Fifth Plan in the second half of the decade. In this process, there will be a shift in the strategy of planning towards a human focus for development, with equal emphasis on the development of girls and boys. This shift would be feasible only by involving women, right from the start, in their own development. In turn, this aim is conditional on a community-based approach, involving the following two strategic elements:

Communities, especially of the poor and involving the effective participation of women, have to be assisted in mobilizing, empowering and activating themselves as viable groups in responding to the needs of children, especially girls.

A system of effective local self-government has to be in place in order to take charge of both responsibilities and resources for achieving the community's goals for children. Powers required for this purpose must devolve to the local level.

The conventional approach of a government-led process towards social economic development will be adapted into a community-government partnership on behalf of children, with a lead role for women. This is true, particularly of their health, education and employment.

For alleviation of poverty, the pattern of development and its institutional structures need to be reshaped. In this perspective, the goals of development must go beyond economic growth and poverty alleviation towards equality and the quality for all, beginning with women.

This Action Plan is a response to the intersecting needs of women and children, within a holistic approach, through services converging at the community level, taking full advantage of the inter-linkages between the goals.

Resources have been a perennial constraint in attempts to raise the autonomy and productivity of the poor, and particularly the women among them. The estimated cost of achieving the goals, will be met in ways indicated in section 1.9 of this Action Plan.

Role of the Ministry of Social Welfare

The Ministry of Social Welfare as lead agency has the responsibility of formulating the National Action Plan on the goals for children, based on the Convention on the Rights of the Child. It will coordinate implementation and monitoring of the Action Plan, in association with the relevant ministries, non-governmental organizations and international agencies, in accordance with the plan as detailed in section 8 of this document.

For this purpose, an inter-ministerial steering committee has been established. The Fourth Five-Year Plan has been adjusted to respond more specifically to gender-specific needs. A process has been initiated to increase plan allocations for the girl child in the concerned social developmental sectors.

In close cooperation with local government institutions, non-government organizations and community level formations, the Ministry of Social Welfare, along with other ministries, will assist women's groups to activate themselves on behalf of the girl child.

An inter-ministerial sub-committee has been set up to review existing laws related to children, to make them responsive to the needs to the girl child. A comprehensive National Policy on Children is being formulated.

A variety of activities have been initiated to raise social awareness on the situation of girls and on social action to improve it. This includes public discussions, cultural programmes, social mobilization meetings (involving school girls, teachers, parents and community leaders), working sessions with media personnel and a variety of publications and radio and television programmes. These activities involve different ministries, particularly the Ministry of Social Welfare & Women's Affairs and a number of organizations. The Shiksha Academy, Bangladesh Television, Radio Bangladesh, UNICEF and a large number of non-governmental organizations will join hands. These activities will be intensified and sustained throughout the decade in support of the activities specified in the Action Plan.

Situation of the Girl Child in Bangladesh

For the purposes of this Action Plan, the Girl Child will include the adolescent girl; and the relevant age group is accordingly defined as 0-18 years.

The situation of girl child has to be assessed against the broader background of the situation of children on the one hand and that of women on the other. There are 50 million children under-18 years, 16 million of whom are below 5 years. Half of all deaths in Bangladesh occur among children under 5 years of age. About three-fourths of all children live below the poverty line. Adult literacy levels remain low at around 35 percent, but only 22 percent of women are literate, compared to 43 percent of men.

There has been progress in recent years in several directions such as improvement in access to safe water, primary education, immunisation coverage and sanitary facilities. But the overall situation of the girl child remains depressed, dependent as it is on simultaneous progress in an inter-related cluster of basic goals relevant to all children. The additional disadvantages faced by girls, compared to boys may be summarised as follows:

- She is less privileged both inside and outside the home.
- She has fewer opportunities for education.
- She is nutritionally worse off.
- She has a lower degree of personal safety.

More specifically, life expectancy at birth is lower for girls than for boys. After the first few months of a better chance of survival, child mortality rate (1-4 years) is consistently higher for girls than for boys. The reasons are known: once weaning begins girl babies are given less food than boys, placing them at higher risk of malnutrition and disease. And, parents, seem to be slower in seeking medical help for a sick girl. The incidence of acute malnutrition is worse for girls than for boys in all age groups, most girls receiving 20 per cent fewer calories than boys. The health and nutrition status of the girl begins to deteriorate in

adolescence. Half of all women are married by the time they are 18 years and 20 per cent give birth to their child by the age of 15. Hardly a third of pregnant women receive a minimum of pre-natal care leading to a large proportion of high risk pregnancies.

Girls have traditionally lagged behind boys in basic education

- 50 per cent of girls enroll in primary school, compared to 70 per cent of boys;
- Only 10 per cent of girls (10-14 years) attend school, compared to 23 per cent of boys;
- One out of four boys are in secondary school compared to only one out of 10 girls;
- Only three out of 1000 women are professionally employed.

Societal, cultural and religious values appear to be loaded against female education, though these constraints are gradually diminishing.

Forty per cent of all girls are engaged in household work compared to an negligible

number of boys), yet they are reckoned in official statistics as, economically inactive. In spite of several laws restricting child labour, labour participation of girls (10-14 years) has increased, while the participation of boys has declined.

Disadvantages facing the girl child are compounded by an apparently increasing incidence of violence against girls and women, such as abduction and rape, assault, kidnapping and inhuman trafficking. Despite the existence of laws and stringent penalties, social attitudes towards women's status seem to permit these behavioural aberrations. The contemporary situation of inadequate social opportunities for both adolescent boys and girls to develop normal patterns of work and behaviour leads to large scale migration to city or town in search of a living, aggravating the problems just outlined.

National Goals

All the goals stated in the Bangladesh National Programme for Children apply with

greater urgency and emphasis, to the girl child. The additional major goals, on behalf of the girl child are outlined in section 1, paragraph 2 of this Action Plan. Bangladesh is equally committed to the phased achievement of goals set for the SAARC region in the Colombo Resolution on Children.

In the pursuit of the major, as well as supportive and sectoral goals of the decade for 'children-and-development', Bangladesh will be guided by the following principles enunciated by the SAARC Decade Plan of Action for the Girl Child:

— The equality of status of the girl child will be ensured through special opportunities for her growth and development of her full potential as an individual and as a citizen in her own right.

— Without prejudice to the integration of the goals for the Girl Child with the goals for 'children-and-development' in the 1990s, her situation demands formulation of additional goals and strategies that are sensitive to her specific and

multiple needs; and

— The socio-cultural discrimination prevailing against the girl child in South Asia, as revealed by demographic and socio-economic indicators, requires change in social attitudes and behavioural practices in relation to development opportunities for her.

Accordingly, and as elaborated in section 8 of this Action Plan, the National Goals for the Girl Child will be pursued in three broad, closely coordinated dimensions, namely

- Basic Education
 - Health, Sanitation and Nutrition
 - Legal and Social Support.
- Thus Bangladesh is committed to the following gender-specific objectives, in relation to the goals set in this Action Plan, section 1, paragraph 4.

Basic Education:

— Enrollment of not less than 75 per cent of primary school-age girls by 1995 and completion by not less than 45 per cent of girls in the age group, by 1995. The corre-

sponding percentages for the year 2000 will be 90 percent and 65 per cent respectively.

Efforts will be made to reach the SAARC norm of 50 per cent completion rate by 1995 and the global goal of 80 percent by 2000 for girls as well as boys.

— Adolescent and adult literacy for women (12-35 years) will be raised from 31 percent in 1990 to 40 percent in 1995 and 45 per cent by 2000.

Every effort will be made to reach the SAARC norm of reduction of adult and adolescent illiteracy from the 1990 level by 25 percent by 1995.

— In addition, acquisition of knowledge, skills and values required for better living will be made possible for girls and women using the mass media and other forms of modern and traditional communication and social action. The effectiveness of the efforts will be measured in terms of behavioural change.

Health, Sanitation and Nutrition: Infant and under-5 mortality, morbidity and malnutrition levels being worse for

girls, special efforts will be made not only to reduce the relevant rates but also to eliminate gender disparities within them. For example, a third to a half of the children born have low birth weight, 2.5 kg or less. This will be reduced, by half the 1990 level, by the year 2000.

— Delaying the age of marriage and the first pregnancy will be given the highest priority through the decade, with a view to promoting the autonomy of girls and women, to assist their education and development, to control malnutrition, to reduce maternal mortality and to limit the population growth rate.

— Linked to the objectives as above, the access for girls and women to knowledge on child spacing and child care (emphasizing breastfeeding and proper weaning practices) will be rapidly enhanced.

— Disease control and prevention will be accelerated by improving immunisation coverage and quality and more effective control of diarrhoea and

acute respiratory infection, in order to achieve the specific goals set in this direction.

Girls and women stand to benefit most by achieving goals for water and sanitation, as stated in the National Programme of Action. The Action Plan will therefore provide added impetus to achieving the goals.

Legal and Social Support: The key concern here is to change the social attitude which assigns an inferior status to girls and women. This will be pursued by reconstructing the socio-economic and legal system to become more supportive of women's development on an equal footing with that of men. In this approach, the following categories of activities will receive priority attention.

— Poverty alleviation through vocational skill development in non traditional areas, focused on girls.

— Protection of children in especially difficult circumstances, through community support and legal measures, with special attention to girls.

— Promotion of a social climate conducive to raising the status of girls and women within the family and the society, by strengthening appropriate institutions and values.

— Provision of care, familial protection and other basic support through social institutions and community-based programmes to orphans and destitute and shelterless children, with equal attention to girls and boys.

— Provision of education, training and rehabilitation services including guidance, counselling and special support to physically and mentally disabled children, girls as well as boys.

— Expansion of day care centres and allied services for children of working mothers, with emphasis on the girl child.

— Enhanced participation of girls in sports and socio-cultural activities through expanded facilities for physical education, indigenous games and socially acceptable recreational activities.



Photo: Shiksha Akademi



Violence against, and Abuse of Girl Children Rising Alarming