



War and Women

by A S M Mostafizur Rahman

War brings sufferings to all irrespective of race, sex and religion. However, women are naturally physically less strong compared to men and are therefore less able to protect themselves, as such in situations of war they suffer relatively more. No number of excuses can justify war. Therefore, we must put all our efforts at preventing war, at stopping war, at de-escalating tension.

SINCE the dawn of civilization, through innumerable upheavals and revolutions family has remained the basic unit of human life. Even in the ultra-modern society where living together rather than marriage is fashionable, family continues its important existence. Therefore, human welfare lies in the welfare of the family.

It does not need a very high degree of wisdom to understand that mother or the woman is the root or anchor of the family. Primarily, she is the one who tries to hold the family together against all odds. Not only in humans but also in other animals the female partner generally plays the more active role in caring for the offsprings and looking after households. I am no expert on wars and more so about women. However, in more than six decades of my life from childhood to this ripe advanced age, one thing I have learnt for sure is that woman as mother, sister, wife and a very understanding friend and companion, plays a most important role in a successful man's life. I consider myself fairly successful. And I can tell you without any hesitation that I would not have been where I am today but for the women who have come into my life at different times and in different roles.

Now let us look at war. In simple words, war is the oppo-

site of peace. Any act or event that breaks peace is an act or incident of war. However, we often don't notice individual acts or incidents that violate peace in a small way. But when such acts accumulate or when there is an outbreak of such acts in large scale over a considerable area we call it war. While temperance, tolerance moderation and understanding are the forces of peace, their opposites, i.e., intolerance, intolerance, extremism and hatred or jealousy, i.e., lack of understanding is the cause of war.

In war one of the first things that happen is that innocent people get killed and families are uprooted. Able bodied men are sent out to the front leaving behind the women, children and invalids without protection. In these circumstances, as fortunes keep see-sawing in a war, the unprotected women, children and the invalid are the ones that suffer most. They are exploited by unscrupulous businessmen; they are the targets of unscrupulous use of weapons of mass destruction; and God save them when they are faced with the indignity of occupation. While in situations of occupation, able-bodied men can run away to prepare for another day's battle, the women, children and the invalid are left at the mercy of the occupation forces. Often the women have to suffer the most

cruel oppressions and indignities at the hands of the occupation forces. They are physically tortured, sexually abused and forced into all kinds of mental works. The plight of humanity and more so of women in situations of war is manifested in Bosnia, in Rwanda and in all other battle fields, of which there are a plenty around the world today. The women of Bangladesh have had more than their share of war during this century. The nightmare memories of the war of liberation of Bangladesh are still so very vivid.

War brings sufferings to all irrespective of race, sex and religion. However, women are naturally physically less strong compared to men and are therefore less able to protect themselves, as such in situations of war they suffer relatively more. No number of excuses can justify war. Therefore, we must put all our efforts at preventing war, at stopping war, at de-escalating tension. We must talk to each other, we must communicate with each other, we must continue to try to understand each other better, we must promote tolerance, temperance and moderation as we seek to prevent war. We must avoid all forms of extremism, intolerance and seek to go into the causes of hatred, jealousy and misunderstanding and remove them altogether. Only in this



War leaves women ravaged

War leaves women ravaged. We can hope to establish peace and protect humanity — women, men and all.

As I write these words, I think about such good things as freedom, human rights, equality, etc. However, as we struggle to establish these good things sometime we are carried away to the extremes where we forget about the freedom of the next person, rights of the next person and equality of the next person. We must be extremely careful and make sure that we do not encroach upon any other person's rights in any way. The safe thing for each of us to do is to be willing to give up a little bit of my own right to ensure that the next person can enjoy his rights in full.

We are calling for an end to all hostilities all over the world. Let dialogue 'replace confrontation and understanding replace hatred. May women all over the world live in peace and security. May all humanity prosper in peace.

The writer is Minister for Foreign Affairs, Government of Bangladesh.

DOMESTIC VIOLENCE It does Happen in Middle Class Homes

by Shaheen Anam

ONE hears a lot of discussions on violence against women in the street, work place, women being forced into prostitution and trafficking of women. One kind of violence that is least discussed is domestic violence. Any reference to it is shrugged aside as a phenomenon of poor households. Domestic violence in middle class homes is not acknowledged, is not discussed and, therefore, everyone pretends that it does not exist.

But in reality the picture is very different. In spite of increased education and employment opportunities for middle class women, they are on the whole perceived as dependent both psychologically and financially. The social taboo against discussion of such private matters as domestic violence in public is still very strong. Like in most societies, in Bangladesh too, people from the middle class are most sensitive to scandals and gossips, therefore the pressure to hide any family dispute or to maintain a facade of a happy marriage is very strong.

Last week we read with horror the story of Rehana, the wife of an Army Major, who was allegedly attacked by a gang of miscreants. Doctors could not save her life as the blow to her with an iron rod was fatal. It was later discovered that the miscreant was no other than her husband, the man who had one day vowed to love, protect and look after her. Poor Rehana or many others like her have no protection against such miscreants.

The major while confessing his crime said that he did not mean to kill her. Perhaps not, but he did want to hurt her very badly or else why would he pick up an iron rod? He also said that she provoked him into it. The provocation being, she made derogatory remarks about his dead mother. One is constantly amazed at the variety of reasons for which women can be killed in our society.

The question that comes to mind is why mostly women are victims of men's anger? Why can't they find some other way to vent their frustration? Why at the slightest provocation the man lifts up his hand to beat his wife, to punish, to humiliate and even to kill. The reason is obvious, he can get away with it. Aside from protests from certain quarters, men get the sanction of society to do as they please with their wives. Not only that, a man can also blame his wife and hold her responsible for the whole affair. For example, the major in question will have many sympathisers who will say, 'why

did his wife provoke him? Or some might even say 'what else can a self-respecting son do if his mother is insulted?'

As has happened in previous cases, the Major will probably be tried and punished. There will be a lot of publicity, the press will give it lots of attention. There will be pressure from women's groups to ensure that justice is done. When it is all over, everyone will forget about it and meanwhile, women like Rehana will continue to get battered. Taken

It is not only the poor or the illiterate people who abuse their wives or have negative attitude about women. What goes on in middle class homes is not known to us but we should always keep in mind that whenever we read about one Rehana, there are thousands of invisible silent Rehanas whose voices have been stilled because of social pressure to maintain the sanctity of marriage. They too may die like Rehana if some action is not taken now.

punishment of some will not solve any problem. One has to acknowledge the fact that before a woman is actually killed she had most probably been suffering many years of abuse but no one had ever heard about it. One wonders how many bluffed poor Rehana must have suffered before the final and fatal one struck.

One of the theories going around now is that marriages are breaking up among the middle class because women have become too demanding, independent and selfish. They no longer want to adjust and the virtue of sacrifice is not being instilled into them. I can only say that I wish this were true for the majority of middle class women. It is totally unfair to cite the example of a handful and make generalisation

about the rest. One must remember, it is only the few handful number of women who have the option, the choice and the freedom to take a decision about their marriages and their lives. Most resign themselves to fate and try to adjust no matter what the provocation is.

The alternative to an abusive marriage is sometimes worse and therefore women stay thinking that at least this provides some kind of security for them and their children. Examples of women who have left their husbands because of abuse, neglect, multiple marriage etc and have later returned, are all around us. The sad thing is that society gives sanction to it and people have short memory.

Another point of view is that bringing it out in the open makes the situation worse. Their theory is that since we cannot provide any shelter or long-term protection or security to abused women, we should not also talk about because this makes her situation worse at home. Perhaps this is true, but not bringing it out in the open has not reversed or improved the situation also. We still have some men in our society who publicly say that nobody has the right to comment on how a man treats his wife or daughter. The concept of viewing women as property is still very prevalent in our culture.

It is now time to realise that domestic violence is not a familial affair but a social malady. It is a problem that most societies are trying to grapple with as it cuts across cultures, borders and class. What is needed is an understanding of the problem, its acknowledgement and, then, ways to find solution. Hiding it under middle class hypocrisy will never make it go away. This message should go to both men and women because it is a gender issue and not only a women's issue.

At the core of the issue is the question of power. Are men willing to share some of the power that they have enjoyed alone for so long? Are they up to the challenge? The path towards sharing of power is through the empowerment of women. This does not mean taking away power from men but just sharing it. Empowerment can only come through education, employment and increased opportunities for women. But before that attitude and perceptions must undergo a change. Society's attitude towards women, their role, responsibilities and contribution must be recognised and that is where a lot of work is required.

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Mutilation in the Name of Chastity

Sara Mansavage writes from Khartoum

THE lights are dim and the voices quiet. Tension fills the room where Nafisa, a six-year-old Sudanese girl lies on a bed in the corner. Her aunt, 25-year-old Zeinab, watches protectively as her niece undergoes the procedure now known as female genital mutilation (FGM), formerly called female circumcision.

The procedure, performed without anaesthesia, entails partially or totally cutting away a girl's external sexual organs.

Zeinab does not approve. For the past year she has been trying to persuade her mother and sister to spare Nafisa from the procedure. She lost the battle with her family, but she will stay at her niece's side. She watches Nafisa lying quietly, brave and confused, and remembers her own experience.

Zeinab underwent the procedure twice. At six years old she had the more moderate form of FGM in which the covering of the clitoris is removed. When she was 15 the older women of her family insisted she have the Pharaonic form, which involves removal of the entire clitoris and the labia and stitching together of the vulva, leaving just a small hole for urine and menstrual blood.

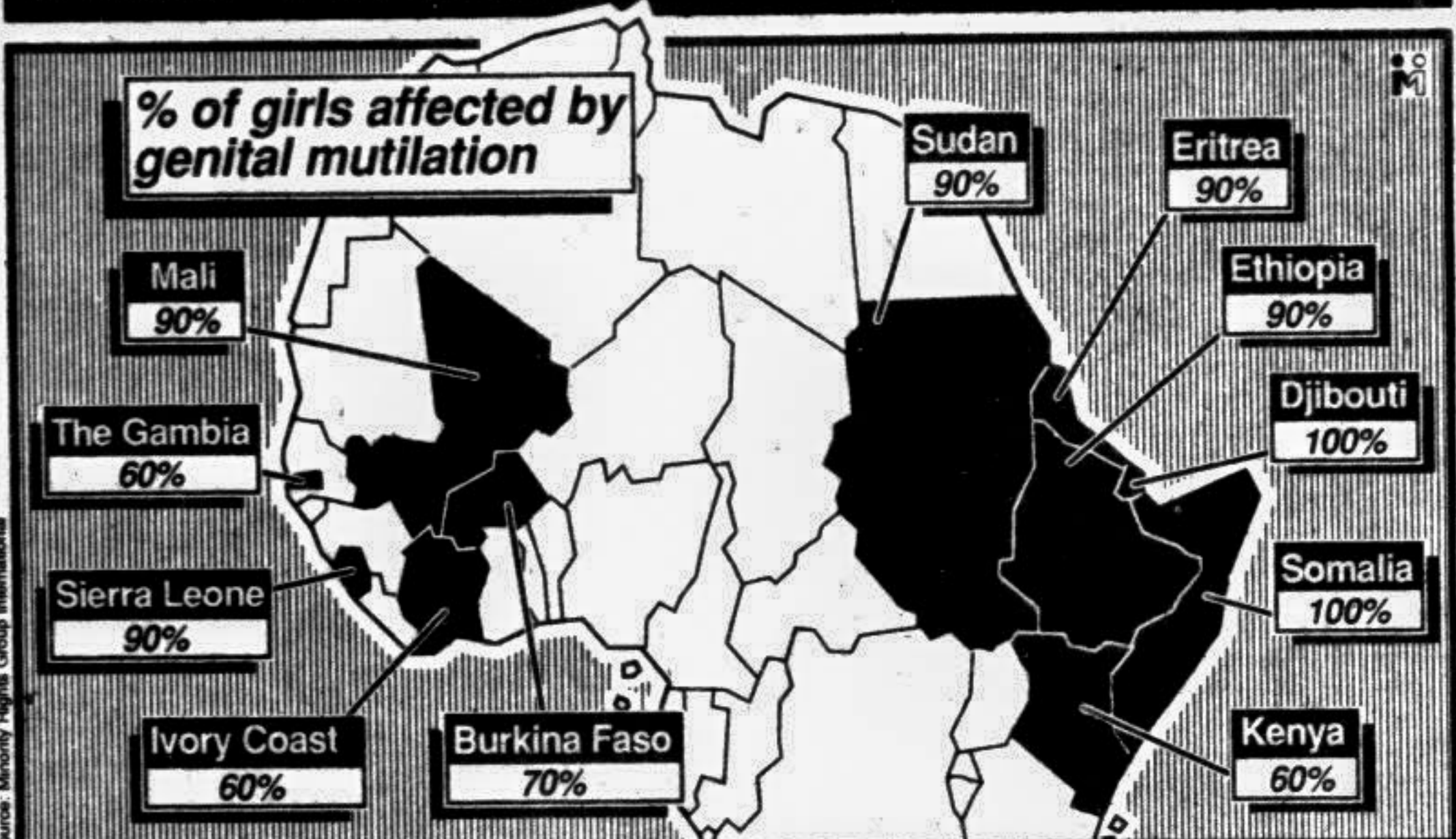
Zeinab still remembers the pain, the face of the women performing the procedure, and the sound of her flesh being cut. She also remembers bleeding and being sick for weeks.

This extreme form of FGM has been performed on 82 per cent of Sudanese women, according to a recent survey. Worldwide, 85 to 114 million girls and women in more than 30 countries have been subjected to it.

Female genital mutilation has long been performed to ensure chaste or monogamous

Millions of women worldwide have been circumcised, though the procedure is hazardous to health, designed to suppress female sexuality and is not officially sanctioned by Christianity or Islam. Gemini News Service reports on a campaign to eliminate the practice in Sudan, where it is illegal but common.

Under the knife



behaviour by suppressing female sexuality. It is commonly — although erroneously — attributed to religious edict. But neither Islam nor Christianity officially sanctions it.

FGM is dangerous. It is estimated that untrained traditional birth attendants perform two-thirds of the procedures. They typically have limited knowledge of health and hygiene and often use inadequately cleaned traditional instruments. Side-effects include

trauma, bleeding and haemorrhage; pain, stress and shock; infections, which can be fatal; painful and difficult sexual relations; obstructed labour and difficult childbirth; and psychological trauma. The effects can last a lifetime.

The practice was declared illegal in Sudan in 1941, but that has done little to stop it. About 90 per cent of northern Sudanese women have had it done.

The most common reason for its continuation given in surveys is fear of social criticism: Although women in the 16-to-30-year age group are receptive to the notion of eradication of FGM, older women are resistant. Many fear that an uncircumcised daughter will be a social outcast whom no man will marry.

But efforts to stop the procedure are beginning. Dr Anna Abdel Rahman, coordinator of

the Sudan National Committee on Harmful Traditional Practices has been working to eliminate it.

"It has nothing to do with religion, and it damages women's health and socio-economic life," she says, calling on women to fight to stop FGM. She has gained government support, and eradication of FGM is now part of the National Plan of Action for the Survival, Protection and Development of Sudanese Children. An initial three-year education effort focuses on Central State, where the Pharaonic form is widespread.

With funds from the Dutch government, Swedish Radda Barnen and the United Nations Children's Fund, the National Committee is targeting community leaders, health workers and women's and youth organisations in a comprehensive awareness-raising effort. Dr Rahman hopes to eradicate FGM by the year 2000.

It is too late for Zeinab and Nafisa. But teaching them the importance of eradicating FGM may spare their daughters from this harmful tradition.

The writer is a freelance journalist formerly based in Khartoum.

How a Woman was Deceived by her Ex-husband

A woman called Lata was married to Abul of Dhaka 4 years ago. Their marriage was duly solemnized and the Nikahnama was registered under the Marriage and Divorce Registration Act 1974 of Bangladesh. Abul was residing at his workplace which is quite close to Dhaka. Lata was staying with her brother and his family in Dhaka.

Within a few months of their wedding Lata's husband started neglecting her. Lata would visit her husband at his residence from time to time. Actually, she was trying her best and making all kinds of efforts to keep the marriage going. But though it was not working well they had a daughter. On 15.6.94 she went to

visit her husband as usual and when she was returning she was told by her husband to rent a house where they could live together. During this visit too they had sexual relations.

However after that visit she came to be informed that her husband registered a divorce on 10.5.93. This message was conveyed to her by her brother. Lata never received any Talak notice from the Union Parishad.

From the above mentioned case study it has clearly revealed that Lata was cheated by her ex-husband who registered divorce one year ago and sexually used her after one year of their divorce.

Now she is going through a terrible mental trauma and

feeling herself guilty of sinful acts even though she was victim of deliberate imposition.

This is purely a case of cheating and deceit. The law says (sec-493 of The Bangladesh Penal Code) that 'Every man who by deceit causes any woman who is not lawfully married to him and to cohabit or have sexual intercourse with him in that belief, shall be punished with imprisonment of either description for a term which may extend to ten years and shall also be liable to fine.

Now we have to look into the laws, where loopholes are made use of against the weaker party.

1. It is possible to register the divorce, before sending the divorce notice to the

Chairperson.

2. Anybody can register a divorce without sending a copy of divorce notice of divorce notice to the chairperson of Union Parishad.

3. The divorce has become effective, even the wife did not receive the divorce notice.

This is weakness in Section 7 of the Family Law Ordinance which says the divorce become effective 90 days after notice of the pronouncement has been delivered to the Chairman. While the Chairman is supposed to send the notice upon to the wife, it does not stop the divorce being finalised if he does not.

— Ain O Salish Kendra

ASA — A Ray of Hope

by Belen Cueva Laud, CPA

THE future might be bleak for a very poor woman, yet one thing that can keep her going during this miserable stage, is "HOPE".

A legacy of poverty, illiteracy, and often times nothingness can drive a person to despair. Yes, if no one extends a helping hand, nobody hears your plea, nor guide you to a better tomorrow, then misery lingers on.

In Bangladesh, non-government organisations are famous for their assistance in women's empowerment, health education and trainings for the alleviation of the poverty. An honourable work indeed!

Here is one which I have known for just a few weeks. An NGO known as "ASHA" to so many in Bangladesh. It is ASA for me. An association for social advancement, for I am not from Bangladesh. Then I learned about the many things that this association has done for the community of Bangladesh.

ASA has been organized about 13 years ago and has helped a thousand beneficiaries. But in 1992, it has started a new programme which was proven to have an accelerated impact on the lives of so many. A comprehensive approach, meant to develop the capabilities, the industry and the human relationship of the poor and bring him away from the fangs of poverty.

Education first is introduced in a very practical way. Women learning with an organized group. 20 women compose one group. They democratically elects from among themselves their chairperson,

vice-chairperson, secretary and treasurer. Education is introduced for a period of eight weeks where in they shall learn how to write, read a word, learn what to eat and drink, discuss livelihood projects, learn how to earn, save and spend wisely.

ASA has realized that within this span of time beneficiaries have voluntarily prepared themselves in going into a viable money-making project, or a 'Way of Life'. An assessment of the need is analyzed by a well trained management staff. Savings are being emphasized.

for it means commitment for a future. Thus, a gauge that a beneficiary is willing to pursue economic plans and develop a harmonious relationship with ASA who can assist in building a better future.

This set of idea is successfully accepted by the group members who are enjoying benefits from ASA. Then, it is duplicated in many thanas in the different parts of the country, using resources within their reach. The commitment to serve and rally behind the people to fight poverty pushes this institution to widen its

coverage day by day.

At a glance, as of June 30, 1994, it has given loan benefits to 251, 456 group members. Likewise, it has received Savings Deposits from 269, 441 group members. The rate of recovery is 99.50 per cent. ASA manages its operation in a cost effective way.

The remarkable relationship based on trust and confidence that both ASA and the beneficiaries enjoys symbiotically, for me, can go a long way. Self-sufficiency is attainable.

Children who are healthy, nutritiously fed, given an example of a harmonious family relationship, the power to communicate and pursue a profitable way of life, is his mothers' ray of hope.



Women are credit-worthy — photo: Unicef