

Women on the Move

Democracy is Meaningless without Protection of Human Rights

by Shaheen Anam



Soon after Yasmeen's murder, the authorities made promises to punish the culprits as per the laws of the land. As usual, a 'high level' investigation committee was set up but we have yet to see the outcome. Recently, a local newspaper reported that the court has asked for one month extension again for submission of the investigation report. This we hear after seven months of her death. Yasmeen's mother had filed a case

against the four guilty policemen, but all she hears is that it will take time. There is a saying by a famous man that 'justice delayed is justice denied'. Often, that is the fate of most victims and their families especially if they happen to be from poor communities and even more so if they happen to be women.

Meanwhile, all forms of violence continues. Domestic violence, is as pervasive if not more and yet not talked about. It still remains a familial affair rather than a social problem. State sponsored violence took on a newer and more sinister dimension with the rape and murder of Yasmeen closely followed by the rape of Marjina in Chudanga and many others. We have not heard of any concrete steps being taken by authorities to check the law enforcing forces such as police from raping and assaulting women and children. Traditional and religious norms are continuously used to oppress women and attempts to come out of the traditional dictates of marriage and marital responsibilities are vehemently opposed and scorned upon.

However, all is not lost. As awareness on violence increases, more and more professional groups are joining the movement to resist it. Doctors with their skills of forensic testing are now joining hands

with activists and lawyers to develop methods of verifying incidences of assault, rape etc. Women entrepreneurs are coming forward with ideas and resources as never before. Well known artists have lent their voices and talents to inform, to communicate and to sensitize. The print media continuously brings the issues to national attention and willingly collaborate with women's groups. There is a realization among women that street activism has to join hands and run parallel with sound professional knowledge, commitment of the elite class and mass mobilization of women from all walks of life in order to make a dent on the social disease of violence against women.

Ultimately the issue is of patriarchy and power relations. Perceptions that half of the country's population is somehow not as equal as the other half has to change. The power balance has to undergo a shift within homes, families and communities. Those who perpetrate violence perceive themselves as the powerful, the stronger, and the superior, the victims are perceived as powerless, weaker and inferior. That is the perception we will have to change because women are not in any way inferior, weak or powerless. Infact they never were, only perceived to be so. The task is no doubt daunting but with our backs to the wall we have no other alternative but to struggle and continue to struggle till...

Harassed, Heckled, or Complimented?

by Gemini Wahhaj

Even in the West, where men are more accustomed to female colleagues and female accomplishment, short skirts and low necklines have gotten women into trouble. But ingrained in this approach is a basic fallacy: that sexual harassment is somehow a woman's fault, that we don't get respect because we don't deserve it.

HARASSED on the streets, at New Market, or at a meena bazar? Nobody turns an eyebrow. Women in Dhaka have grown accustomed to a range of untoward behaviour at most crowded public places, ranging from offending remarks ('mera dil dewana') to fondling. What is particularly alarming, however, is the growing realisation, as more and more women go to work, that harassment awaits at the office also. Last year, the German Cultural Institute held one of the first discussions in the country on the topic of sexual harassment, a term which is not easily defined or understood in the context of Bangladesh. Least by women themselves. In fact, older generations of women have faced the same kind of behaviour in their times but have failed to identify it as offensive. Nowadays, a growing number of women, accustomed to male company and confident of their own independence, schooled in the female consciousness, so to speak, have finally begun to realise that some behavior from their co-workers is simply not acceptable.

Sexual harassment is any conduct that makes a person feel threatened or uncomfortable or interferes with his/her work. The most blatant instances of sexual harassment are sexual advances. But even a passing remark, if perceived to be threatening, may qualify as harassment. Consider this: Your boss says, 'you are an extremely attractive woman.' This is not welcome attention, and attractiveness is definitely not an attribute you want to be appreciated for at work, but you perceive that you may lose your job if you take offense at the remark. So you smile and let it pass. The fact that you feel uncomfortable, but are afraid to voice your opinion, is what harassment means.

The most common form of harassment in Bangladesh offices is offensive remarks, jokes about women's intelligence, their position in society ('all the trouble was created by women coming out of their homes'), and their physical weakness. Also common are verbal advances such as 'you have beautiful eyes' or 'I am mad for you!' Many remarks are hurled at a group of women, such as 'let us have a competition to see who is the

most beautiful woman in this department.' One young woman also felt compromised by unwelcome offers of gifts and special favors.

Often, the men who are guilty of such behavior are oblivious of any offense. They have been acting this way for years and nobody has told them it's wrong. But at the heart of such long ingrained habits, is a basic lack of respect for women and abominably wrong notions of what it means to be female. Ideas of women as 'mothers', 'the weaker sex', and 'beautiful brainless objects' detracts from an equal and mutually respectful environment at work.

Also, there are far greater consequences than a few passing remarks. Women are routinely excluded from participating in management decisions, relegated to unimportant tasks by both their superiors and co-workers, and often used for such decorative tasks as entertaining visitors or serving refreshments at a meeting.

How are women coping with harassment? For the most part, women have reacted by 'correcting' their own behavior. One office held meetings to introduce a dress code in an attempt to prevent 'provocative' and unprofessional appearances that would encourage male disrespect. On the whole, this is a good idea. Professionalism on women's part will command more respect. Even in the West, where men are more accustomed to female colleagues and female accomplishment, short skirts and low necklines have gotten women into trouble. But ingrained in this approach is a basic fallacy: that sexual harassment is somehow a woman's fault, that we don't get respect because we don't deserve it.

If anything, women should be taught to respect themselves and their sexuality, and to identify harassment as unacceptable behavior. A crash course in sexual harassment for male executives is also a good idea. Corporate Bangladesh is just starting to learn about good management styles, employee motivation, and positive work environments. Add another seminar to the list: 'Create an Enabling Work Environment: Eliminate Sexual Harassment.'

Ninety-five: Enduring Another Year of Afflictions

by Ekram Kabir

Although Pakistan is the main destination of the Middle East traffickers, due to various obstacles they are sending Bangladeshi women — who mostly are helpless, poor, tortured and abandoned by husbands and widowed — to fill up the Indian brothels. These brothels were previously dominated by Nepalese women, but due to increased trafficking, Bangladeshi women are being sent to gradually take their place.



bay and West Bengal, according to human rights sources, of which 4,500 are in West Bengal alone. Apparently despite some optimism last year regarding women's well-being, their human rights situation was one that reveals increasing cases of mental and physical cruelty. This was, one can emphatically say, because the implementers of policies that ensure human rights — the politicians — were too engrossed in violating the civil and political rights of the entire nation.

The UNICEF Progress of the Nations 1995 reported that around 40,000 Bangladeshi children are engaged in prostitution in Pakistan. Another 10,000 to 12,000 are forced into this 'unwanted' livelihood in Bom-

the services of the former in taking late action against the culprits. Thirdly, as in the previous years, neither the government, nor the local administration (with rare exceptions) responded adequately to the Fatwa-related oppression of women, although it represented a challenge to the rule of law and a defiance of the authority of the civil administration.

Meanwhile at the international level, the message of the Beijing Conference around the world was to 'keep on fighting' where Bangladeshi women groups took three grassroots women along with the representatives. The expenses were borne by the rich and private organisations. These three women were trained by a national committee to speak on their own behalf. Now questions arise — 'could they speak, let alone understand real sense of the summit?' and 'what impact did these three Beijing returnees have at their level?'

The organisational and preparatory homework of Bangladesh — both governmental and non-governmental — had some certain awareness bottlenecks. The preparatory and steering committees were mostly elitist in structure and, according to the CCHRB Re-

I refer to the gang rape of a minor child who was picked up from the Kamalapur railway station on 29th March. She was found bleeding profusely and in a state of shock. As the country prepared to celebrate the triumph of democracy, little Lucky, a mere child of 10 was robbed of her childhood, doomed to a life of confusion, trauma and dejection. We know of no arrests being made so far nor the law enforcing authorities taking any steps to ensure security of children who are often compelled to sleep in public places.

On the 30th a woman in Sylhet while the nation celebrated the establishment of a caretaker government, one of the four wives of Haroon, was beaten to death by her husband. We have not heard of any case being registered or any arrests being made even though the name of the husband is known. There is a constant debate on whether violence has increased or decreased or just reportedly increased. No proper documentation is done. We all know if ever the truth is allowed to come out, cases of unreported violence will far exceed the reported ones. One of course wonders what happens to the victims, the survivors or their children?

Such incidents and many more are reported regularly but also forgotten regularly. We seldom see a follow-up such as reports of arrests, court case or of convictions. It is under-

standable that newspaper reporters have to work under certain constraints yet there is an urgent need to develop some kind of a monitoring and follow-up system. Society seems to have built a shell around itself whereby such horrendous acts of barbarism do not affect us anymore. Some shrug it off as one of those things which cannot be helped. Many say, violence exists everywhere in the world while others blame it on poverty — the one word used as an excuse for every problem in the world.

However, the above is not true for most of the women community. A major portion of the women's movement's thrust in Bangladesh has been in the areas of violence against women. Women's groups and organizations have been campaigning for years on repealing discriminatory laws, implementation of existing ones and for changes in the judicial system to protect women and children from violence. The rape and murder of Yasmeen shocked the country and galvanized the women's community to form a coalition of Sammilito Nari Samaj. Since its inception the coalition has organized various activities to raise awareness on the issues surrounding violence and also to bring pressure on the administration to implement laws that exist yet do not pro-

AFTER the heated debates at the Cairo Conference in '94, and high-sounding forward planning and promises of the Beijing Conference, the year 1995 was expected to be a year of positive results for women all over the world including in Bangladesh. But what was experienced throughout the year by the women of Bangladesh was quite shocking, according to the Coordination Council for Human Rights in Bangladesh (CCHRB) Report '95.

The CCHRB Report that was launched on March 4 devoted five chapters out of its 18 giving clear picture of the dismal situation of the state of women's rights last year showing a sharp decline than that of the previous year — 1994. Despite rapidly spreading women rights awareness, cases of human rights violation were on the rise, says the report.

Atrocities against women in the form of rape, receiving acid burns and Fatwa announcement were higher in '95 than those of the previous year. Two hundred and sixteen women were raped — in many cases, the police were involved last year (in '94 this number was 142); 181 women became victims of acid burns compared to 68 in 1994; and 22 women — all married — were subjected to Fatwa, an instrument of persecution used by the social elites in the rural areas.

The CCHRB Report shows that it was the women who became the worst scapegoats of these religious decrees. Apparently, the tentacles of Fatwa reach not only the womenfolk of the country, but also those institutions or organisations which seek to upgrade the status of women through bringing

about a qualitative change in their socio-economic life.

As a cat's-paw, Fatwa — in its operation — in Bangladesh has been found to serve the purpose of those obscurantists who are basically 'anti-change'; determined to retain their traditional control over a backward society, mostly in the countryside. To put it more clearly: Fatwa is a symbol for regressive action by these elements to halt the surge of progress.

The worst kind of Fatwa-aided violation of female dignity took place, according to the Report, in the village Pankar Hatt of Mymensingh district. Momota Begum had to face continuous obscene overtures from her father-in-law. One night, her husband's appearance saved her from a rape attempt by her father-in-law. She narrowly escaped from almost losing her honour, but failed to save her marriage. It was because Moulana Muslem Uddin of the Baraigram madrasa had a Fatwa pronounced to the effect that Momota couldn't remain the wife of her husband, Mostafa.

The Fatwa-related incidents reveal some certain characteristic features. The Report says: 'First, the Fatwabaz or the perpetrators of Fatwa, belong to the rural power elite, both temporal and religious. Secondly, the victims were either young and poor women or helpless. These were typical cases of how the strong oppressed the weak within a certain societal framework. Such an exploitative use of Fatwa was further demonstrated when it was found out that on most of the occasions, the local police administration refused to cooperate with the victims when the latter sought

SHE resembled the top model Linda Evangelista, with her look, hair cut, height and her smile. Being in the fashion world myself, I've always admired her clothes, her ornaments and accessories that only added to her natural grace and style. Although she is no longer with us, I'm sure, her admirers like me, often remember her. She was a good friend to many people.

Most of all I am reminded of the power she had when

she talked; her voice filling the room, the cheerfulness she had, when she laughed, catching everyone's attention. I also remember the gracefulness she had, when she walked; making passersby stare, and above all, the warmth she always had in her for all.

This American lady was very courageous and hard working. She wanted all the women to stand up on their own and encouraged us so much to work hard and prosper. She listened

"She was a Phantom of Delight"

by Moushumi Nasser

to everyone's problems, and thus shared her own with anyone around her, never caring about things like who was in what position. She treated everyone equally whether it was a secretary, or an officer, a driver, or a messenger girl. I still wonder, why this woman had to remain single and so lonely? I didn't get much chance to get very close to her, still I don't know why I

up, she lived a lonely life, though surrounded by good friends. Her warm and kind heart led her to adopt children in an orphanage giving as much of herself as she could to them. Her only loving niece would sometimes call her at work, and she would leave all her work aside, to give this little child a few minutes to talk. She'd often spent time talking about her niece with her colleagues.

This hard working woman devoted all her time and energy for the children and women of this country. By the time, she took leave for vacation, she was too exhausted. Then came the horrifying news of her accident in Hawaii. I realized the truth quite late, but still could not take it easily. Her death remains a mystery and it haunts me. She was not an experienced diver, then why at the age of 48 did she want to take such chances? What happened underneath the vast ocean, that she wanted to come up so quick, only to meet her death? Did she see something that terrified her? Did she have a stroke?

Today, I write about her, because her death has left a strong impact on me, mentally and spiritually. I have a recurrent dream: I find myself, trying to come up from the deep sea, something is chasing me, there's pressure of water around me as I struggle to move upwards, my heart is pounding too much with my breathing becoming faster every second. I'm all alone under the water, too scared and I wish to meet my friends above waiting for me. Suddenly, there's a terrible pain with awful pressure inside me. I can't breathe anymore, something is wrong, then everything becomes dark. I become Gretchin meeting death in the sea.

Since Gretchen Goodale

joined Unicef Dhaka in 1994, she wanted to be called GG. Her bereaved father took her body home and she was cremated as her wish. In her will, she distributed her property and wealth to her loving children and to her beloved niece. Her organs have been donated too.

I often hear her voice, 'Hello, how are you?' as she was always the first one to greet me. Her smile never faded, at work or outside work. Her laughter still rings in my ears. To me, as possibly to many others, she is like Wordsworth's Phantom of Delight.

'She was a Phantom of Delight' When first she gleamed upon my sight: A lovely Apparition, sent To be a moment's ornament;

Her eyes as stars of Twilight fair: Like Twilights, too, her dusky hair: But all things else about her drawn

From May-time and the cheerful Dawn: A dancing shape, an Image gay: To haunt, to startle, and way-lay.

And now I see with eye serene The very pulse of the machine: A being breathing thoughtful breath, A Traveller between life and death;

The reason firm, the temperate will, Endurance, foresight, strength, and skill: A perfect Women, nobly planned.

To warn, to comforts, and command: And yet a spirit still, and bright, With something of angelic light.

Now we are one year further, Najma has learned a lot at school: she can read and write, she has learned a lot of new words, she can do sums and, last but not least, she has a lot of new friends.

(The author is working as a Special Education Advisor with Helen Keller International, Bangladesh.)

Najma, a Blind Girl in Bangladesh

by Mariette Jansen

Do you know Najma, that cute little girl? The one who is always humming? I'm sure you know her, but what do you know about her? Only that she likes humming and that she is blind? Let me tell you more about her.

Najma was born on a beautiful day in April 1988 in a small village in the North of Bangladesh. She was a healthy little baby and her parents were very proud of her. But then, one year later, she became ill. She suddenly got a high fever which lasted for three days and nights. Her parents didn't know what to do. On the fourth day her temperature came back to normal and initially everybody was relieved. However, it turned out that little Najma had become blind. Her parents were desperate. What would they do with a blind child? How would they behave towards her? How would they talk to her? Perhaps she couldn't understand them anymore. Perhaps she couldn't talk anymore. Perhaps she would even die.

Unfortunately Najma's parents didn't know anyone else in their village who was blind. They didn't know of other parents with blind children. So they had to solve all the problems themselves. That was very difficult for them since they knew so little about blindness. And there were so many questions.

Fortunately Najma was an easy child. Most of the time she was happy. She had no special health problems, she liked playing outside and enjoyed music. In fact her parents faced very few problems with her. The only thing that worried them was Najma's future: would she ever be able to go to school? Would she ever be able to live independently?

One day in May 1995, shortly after Najma's seventh birthday, the headmaster of the village school came to see her. He told them about the possibility of education for blind children in his school as it was an integrated school. That meant that both blind and normal children had access and that they would sit together in the same classroom. This system had been operating in Bangladesh for many

years.

A few days later Najma went to school for the very first time in her life. She was very excited about it as she was a studious child. Her classmates were excited too as they had never dealt with a blind person. That first day Najma heard a lot of things which were absolutely new to her. Mathematics for the blind, special materials, adapted equipment and Braille, a system of reading and writing for the blind. She couldn't believe her ears: a system, consisting of six dots, which made it possible to read and write? She thought the teacher was telling lies. But it turned out to be true.

Next day Najma had her first Braille lesson. It wasn't as difficult as she thought it would be. Her teacher was very patient and didn't mind repeating things. When Najma came home she already knew two letters which she showed her parents as proud as a peacock. Within a few weeks she knew all the letters and she showed everybody how to write her name in Braille.

What turned out to be most difficult was to adapt to the totally new situation. Najma wasn't used to being with so many other children as she had been alone for several years. The neighbour's children had seldom come to see her because they didn't feel comfortable with a blind child. They didn't know what to do and how to behave towards a blind person. They even thought she wasn't able to play or talk!

In the beginning her classmates had the same attitude. But gradually they discovered Najma was like anybody else. The only difference was that she couldn't see. So she needed a bit of help and that was something the classmates could give her easily.

Now we are one year further, Najma has learned a lot at school: she can read and write, she has learned a lot of new words, she can do sums and, last but not least, she has a lot of new friends.

(The author is working as a Special Education Advisor with Helen Keller International, Bangladesh.)



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by Jim Davis

