

No Let-up in Sexual Assault on Women

by Md Asadullah Khan

Shockingly, the existing laws do not go very much in favour of the victim. Most of the cases, if instituted, end up being a tortuous process with hardly any protection and support coming from any quarters

TRAUMATIC and frightening in ciences of rape, arson and killing are reported in the pages of dailies with sickening regularity. Rapists are targeting the women in all possible places, molesting them even in presence of their parents and husbands to get some perverse pleasure. Sexual harassment, as such, in homes and fields and workplaces is no longer every victim's secret. According to reports made public by the Police Department, in the year 1995 there were 556 recorded cases of rapes in the country. With a slight decrease it was 525 in the year 1996, and the number seems shooting up again in 1997. In this year, within just three months, from January to March, there were 140 recorded cases of rape and in March alone the number of rapes committed stood at 50.

More and more such cases are coming into the open now. As reported in a section of the press on 11th May, Salam (13) raped by the son of a BDR personnel in Jhumjhum area of Jessore was awarded 50 stripes through a village arbitration council headed by one Shahjahan member. Appallingly, this punishment was executed by a young boy of the area. The local thana, it is learnt, refused to record the complaint of rape despite all entreaties by Salma's relatives. Shockingly, the same

"fatwa people" are again active now.

The bestiality of a human rapist, as reported in a section of the press on 8th May shames every human being on earth. Mohsin, a human-beast of Feni raped a 4-year old child on 21st March last. The father of the child, unable to bear the shock fainted and ultimately died on 29th March, the report published in the media says. Another report appearing in the dailies suggest that Shilpi (13), a helpless daughter of a day labourer of Bakerkanda village of Sherpur was raped by one Biplob of the same locality. It is further alleged that medical examination of Shilpi had been delayed by four days due to interference of influential quarters.

Another report published on 12th May in the dailies indicate that one Mohabbat Ali (50), a religious teacher in the Shahinbagh Area of the city raped one Suraiya (13), a housemaid, for three consecutive nights while his wife was away from the house.

Ominously, all these reports and scores of others that do not

reach the media suggest that the country is experiencing almost a total breakdown of law and order. The failing economy and growing poverty in the villages are driving marginal citizens and unemployed youths into crime mostly of violent nature. Quite frequently, the role of law enforcing agencies has been questioned and their inaction has only fueled the criminal activities. The stunning wave of crime makes people wonder whether this is a price they want to pay after so much of trials and tribulations they suffered during the last two decades of 'misrule'. In recent times, sexual harassment, molestation and violence on women have taken a new dimension perhaps dirtiest and most heinous that people could have ever imagined. Lastly the rape victim is done to death either by burning or by acid throwing or by poisoning her food. Parul who was residing in a slum of the Mohammadpur area was doused with oil and then burnt to death. Sheema while in police custody in Chittagong Jail was killed by poisoning of her food.

Shockingly, the existing laws do not go very much in favour of the victim. Most of the cases, if instituted, end up being a tortuous process with hardly any protection and support coming from any quarters.

However, in our country in recent times the bold stand taken by the women's organisation "Nari Pakkha" in putting a halt to all these barbarous crimes and to help these traumatised victims resume a somewhat normal life torn to pieces for no fault of their own, is a laudable venture. People would not have any reservation in thanking this valiant organisation for the way they rescued some young girls from a brothel in the city in the recent past.

In recent times, troubles mostly started with the women workers in business houses and garment factories to respond to co-worker's and boss' sexual advances. In most cases women worker's refusal to respond to such overtures land them to victimisation in the form of termination of employment, withholding of salaries and benefits, and curtailment of

leave or forcing them to work extra-hours beyond office timing and regulations. Most victims would rather not approach the courts and are left with a little choice, since in most cases no action is taken to redress the grievances of the women victims.

If and when the victim or her parents have gone to court, that seems to be a perilous journey, an inordinately long judicial procedure dragging on for years. And the time and money these cases have extracted from the victims have made a mockery of justice. Now in the backdrop of the rising number of rape cases where women are silent victims, it has become necessary that all legal processes that want to institute an enquiry must comprise a woman member to look into the grievances of women victims with sufficient powers to take legal action. Understandably, when the rapist or the harasser is a superior at the office or an influential or affluent person in the society and the victim's parent or husband is economically weak or out of employment or when the victim is a

widow, economic compulsions compel women to sweep their cases under the carpet.

In recent times, brutality and violence by policemen against women is becoming disturbingly frequent. Yasmin was allegedly raped and killed by some policemen in Dinajpur in 1995 and in recent time Sheema's case in Chittagong was presented in the dailies as a floating prostitute to cover up the barbarity committed by the policemen. In an effort to destroy all forensic evidences the dead body of Sheema was cremated in hot haste. People are now questioning if the guarantor of public security is fast becoming a threat to civilised norms.

In most cases after an incident becomes public, the authorities, in an effort to defuse public outcry, takes some action that means "closing" the offending member for a short time. Presumably, the penalty goes no further and that means only repetition of the dastardly acts after a time-gap. People only hope that all such cases shall be probed with all seriousness covering the due processes of law and the guilty should be brought to justice. That measure would only pave the way for the growth of a civil society that the present democratic government professes to establish in the country.

Expecting Life for Mothers

by Ekram Kabir

As far as the situation in Bangladesh is concerned, awareness has to be so created that the problem of 'motherhood' is not seen just as a problem of the 'woman' concerned, but everybody around the woman is involved in it

LACK of maternal care leaves about 28,000 women in Bangladesh dead every year at childbirth and in post-delivery period, according to an estimate made jointly by Obstetrical and Gynaecological Society of Bangladesh and the UN Children's Fund. Maternal mortality may not be new in the country, but the staggering statistics implies to insufficient care for mothers.

"Safe Motherhood doesn't merely end in giving a woman pregnant and giving birth to a child; it's in fact more than that in terms of her rights to survival and to choose," says Dr. Yasmin Ali Haque, a project officer at Dhaka UNICEF, specialising in health and nutrition.

Stretching on the point, Dr. Haque says: "Safe Motherhood means creating the circumstances within which a woman

is, first, enabled to choose whether she will become pregnant, and then, if she does, it has to be ensured that she receives care for prevention and treatment of pregnancy-related complications, and has access to trained birth assistance, emergency obstetric care, if she needs it, and receives care after giving birth to a child."

"These are all very important so that a woman can avoid death or disability from complication of pregnancy at childbirth," she emphasises.

Bangladesh has one of the

highest maternal mortality rates in the world which is five times higher than Sri Lanka's and Vietnam's, and about ten times higher than Malaysia's. "Once a woman develops complications, she needs a special type of 'care' known as emergency obstetric care (EOC) without which she may die, and unfortunately enough, in majority of the cases, women fail to avail this particular care due to various socio-economic and family-related reasons; and only one in 20 women with complications in Bangladesh can get to a facility where emergency obstetric care is available," says Dr. Haque.

The prime complications that cause maternal deaths in Bangladesh are haemorrhages (heavy loss of blood), abortion (spontaneous or induced), eclampsia (convulsions), and puerperal sepsis (infections) and obstructed labour. It is now known all over the world that all pregnant women are risk-prone to serious obstetric complications, and if the access to emergency obstetric services is not available to them and the

prevailing state of the system is not improved, then maternal deaths will continue to rise. One in six women globally develops these fatal complications due to the absence of proper nutrition during pregnancy.

In the context of Bangladesh, this means that while attaining the national goal of reducing maternal mortality is now a must, it is an imperative to focus on EOC services at all levels. And weighing the gravity of women's poor health status, the government has decided to observe May 28 beginning from this year as 'Safe Motherhood Day'. Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina will officially announce it and zoom in on its importance on the day.

As the chips had been down for too long, May 28 is unlikely to be a hobby-horse like observing a host of already existing days in a mundane manner. Instead, it is expected to be a crash programme all over the country, by engaging all concerned professionals, to ensure EOC services at every tier of the country's healthcare system. Evaluating women's contribution to the country's socio-economic development, Bangladesh cannot afford to experience a deplorable number of its women dying every year in absence of care.

Meanwhile, a question may arise: "Do all women who develop complications die as a result?" "No," says Dr. Haque, adding: "But many who do survive suffer with disability and pain for the rest of their lives." She cites 'fistula' as an obvious example: when it occurs, a woman is soon made undesirable by her husband.

Fistula occurs when tissues of the birth canal are deadened by prolonged labour and days of pressure from the baby's skull. Within days and weeks after the birth, the dead tissue falls away, leaving holes which allow leakage from the bladder and rectum. In this state, urine and faeces bypass the muscles that normally control the flow, and the woman becomes incontinent. As such, without an op-

eration to repair the fistula, she will remain so all her life feeling miserable to the extreme, both mentally and physically.

There are some traditional factors, resulting out of ignorance, which help unsafe motherhood to take root. "Many girls are married off too early and are made pregnant even before their own bodies are fully grown and ready to bear children," says the UNICEF project officer. Besides, a woman will run the risk when soon after giving birth to a child she has no choice but to resume sexual relations, regardless of the pain it causes; thus she needs obstetric care very badly. But most of the time, the social taboos fail to understand and overlook that after childbirth, a woman bruised and battered, needs time to recuperate.

Apart from the fact that Bangladesh has a fairly comprehensive health services infrastructure which to an extent is much better than other similar countries, most women with complications fail to get the care they need in time.

According to Dr Yasmin, it happens because of three kinds of delay: Delay in seeking care that results in either not getting to the facility or reaching there when it's too late; delay in reaching to an EOC facility due to the problems of distance, transportation and lack of preparation for emergencies; and delay in starting treatment because there are problems of availability of trained personnel, medicine and necessary equipment. All these delays take place because often proper value at individual, family and social levels — is not put on a woman's life, both as a human being and as a mother.

As far as the situation in Bangladesh is concerned, awareness has to be so created that the problem of 'motherhood' is not seen just as a problem of the 'woman' concerned, but everybody around the woman is involved in it. It can also be looked at in this way — implications for children are too significant to be omitted, that is, concentrating on women more as protectors of children, rather than women as mothers. The physical and emotional cost is beyond measure when women die at childbirth leaving their children motherless.

Dhaka Day by Day

Growing Interest in Physical Fitness

by A S M Nurunnabi



At present, the growing interest in keeping oneself physically fit is very much in evidence. It was not so in the recent past. Not that the need for physical fitness was not felt before. The big difference is that whereas previously such interest was limited to isolated groups of youths devoted to the development of brawn and motley groups of old timers keen on extending their life span. The present trend of acquiring physical fitness has been taken to a new height.

In present-day society, where the old established values in life seem to be on the wane, the new feeling for a healthy mind is a strikingly innovative concept in our social ethos.

Against this backdrop, it may be interesting to view the kaleidoscopic scenario that meets the eyes of one who commands enough physical and mental alertness to get up from bed very early in the morning. Among the things he will notice are firstly the various gears the energetic health seekers don on their rounds. The younger and comparatively affluent among them prefer track suits with gleaming sneakers; some venture out in shorts and trousers with half-sleeve sports wears. Mostly the older generation is less fastidious in draping themselves for their morning routine.

The fields for the physical exercises and regimes in the early morning cover a broad spectrum. In new Dhaka area, the favourite haunts are the Suhrawardy Uddyan, the Ramna Park, the Usmani Uddyan, the Dhanmondi Lake area and the large open spaces in Sher-e-Banglanagar near Sangsad Bhaban and Crescent Lake. All these areas remain very crowded with the healthy enthusiasts. The scenes in these areas at dawn give an idea of the interesting and varied workouts practised by the health-conscious.

Other city denizens living some distance away from these ideal spots make do with traffic-free roads and lanes during the early morning hours. Although from time to time there are stray reports of mugging, these incidents do not seem to dampen the spirit of the early risers. Jogging, free-hand exercises etc are a common sight, while the older ones limit themselves to fast or easy-paced walking depending on age and health condition.

As interesting aspect of the activities of these health enthusiasts often emerges in the form of acquaintances and sometimes camaraderie among the participants who frequently encounter one another in course of their daily rounds. The older ones among them are particularly prone to coming closer to each other which sometimes develop to such a degree that some of them, when their daily rounds are over, sit on a bench or a patch of grass and lose themselves in spirited and sometimes boisterous discussions on any subject under the sun ranging from cabbage to king.

Going Nuclear

THE South-east Asian country is planning to move towards diversification of power sources. Indonesia plans to build the nation's first nuclear power plant in Java, the most heavily populated part of the country.

This is notwithstanding the fact that three citizens group in Jakarta had held a joint meeting last year, opposing the construction of a nuclear power plant and warning the government of serious environmental consequences.

However, projects planned by about 50 private power-generating companies of Indonesia expect to use several non-oil energy sources, including coal and natural gas.

Music On-line

MUSIC will soon be sold and delivered over the telephone. Deutsche Telekom is to offer a dial up audio-on-demand service in Germany later this year, allowing customers to compile their own collection of music. Deutsche Telekom will offer the service by digitising music and compressing it to a twelfth of its original size so that it can be transmitted efficiently by telephone line. Customers will be able to dial up individual tracks, receive them over the telephone line through a modem and save them on computer hard disks.

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IAN FLEMING'S James Bond



by Jim Davis



DRAWN BY JOHN MCLUSKY



After Monday's cyclone

1. Time and tide wait for none, not even for the poor farm couple, Parbati and Niranjana. After bracing Monday's high winds and heavy rains that flattened their bamboo and tin shack, they had no time to waste, waiting for help but to rebuild their home as soon as possible with their own hands.

2. Gathering whatever they could salvage the family waits for relief or shelter at Laldiar Char, near Chittagong city.

3. Waiting for news from Hatiya, Sandwip and Nijhum Dwip: At least five thousand people gather at the bank of Meghna at Char Jabbar in Noakhali. There had been no sea truck service since the cyclone Monday with these off-shore islands. The picture was taken Wednesday afternoon.

— Star photos by AKM Mohsin

