

Alternatives

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Let the Children Remain Children

From the Alternatives Desk

THIS issue is a sequence to our previous issue on Children and Security. The readers might recall that through the Alternatives Desk we had appealed for a change of attitude towards the street children by focusing on the insecurities, agonies and lack of opportunities of the street or not so fortunate children. But certainly the insecurities and lack of opportunities are not peculiar to the street children alone. The two rounds of public dialogues made it quite evident that children irrespective of their socio-economic backgrounds suffer from insecurities, though the nature of the latter might vary.

Ironically enough the children in urban centres no longer have the opportunity to remain children. Lack of space and lack of security confine them to the four walls of their homes. It is only during *hartals* that one sees the children come out and play in the empty streets or more precisely the alleys, and transform themselves into children. But then this is not the whole truth. As the country seems to be poised for another spate of *hartals* one cannot but be saddened by the toll that it is taking on the children. Here I am reminded of a six year old daughter of a friend of mine, who being frustrated at the *lagatar hartals* wrote a letter to the then Leader of Opposition. Addressing her as the *hartal lady* she had urged upon her not to call any more *hartals* so that her father can go to work and get money for them to eat. The newspaper officials where her uncle had taken her to have the letter published refused to do so on the ground that the letter was too *political* for a girl of her age. But then do our politicians realise this reality? Isn't it time for them to shun their politics of violence and instead create spaces, both mental and physical for our children to remain children. Would the society please rise and join hands in this endeavour?

Missing, Kidnapped and Trafficked Children: Myth and Reality

by Prof. Ishrat Shamim and Mohiuddin Ahmed

It is our realisation that introducing Community Policing approach or forming Neighbourhood Watch at community level would be useful in curbing the heinous acts against children. Furthermore, the crucial tool to fight against such crimes is increased police action by establishing special units to deal with them.

THE appalling dimensions of violence against children has made the situation so vulnerable that the concept of human rights as well as 'child rights' appeared questionable to researchers, academics, development practitioners and human rights activists. If one opens a newspaper, web site, satellite and television, one always sees horrendous stories of the violence inflicted on children, each more terrible than the previous ones.

While addressing the issue, Kofi Annan, Secretary General of the United Nations, says, "Violence against women and girls - in our families, communities and societies is the most shameful of all human rights abuses."

He also urged the UN's 185 member states to enact and enforce laws to create a world safe for women and girls.

Recent times have witnessed a surge in the interest on the issue of child lifting, kidnapping and trafficking in Bangladesh. Previously the basic rights of children were a negligible concern but the increasing abuse and the infringement of the same have triggered off a much-needed concern over it. Bangladesh is one of the first twenty-two country to sign the Convention on the Rights of the Children in 1990, enactment of The Children's Act 1974 and adoption of The Children's Rule 1976; National Policy for Children 1994 and the National Plan of Action for Children 1997-2002, November 1998. Moreover, Articles 15, 17, 27, 28 & 31 of the Bangladesh Constitution have laid down the general principles regarding the protection of children from all forms of discrimination and abuse. But sadly enough, even when we are on the verge of entering into the 21st Century, the rights of the children is rarely acknowledged in the society. Child abuses and discrimination continues to pervade the millions of children who are not adequately equipped to voice their needs.

The commoditization process of children globally and particularly in the South Asian countries has given rise to kidnapping and trafficking in children that has shaken the conscientious of the civil society. This is a grave violation of child rights as the World Declaration on the Survival, Protection and Development of Children agreed to declare at the World Summit on 30 September 1990 that "The children of the world are innocent, vulnerable and dependent. They are also curious, active and full of hope. Their time should be shaped in harmony and co-operation. Their lives should mature, as they broaden their perspectives and gain new experience. Therefore it is our responsibility to formulate coherent strategies to protect children from all forms of abuse or even to intervene in cases where the most blatant and extreme forms of child abuse like kidnapping and trafficking that persist in the society take place."

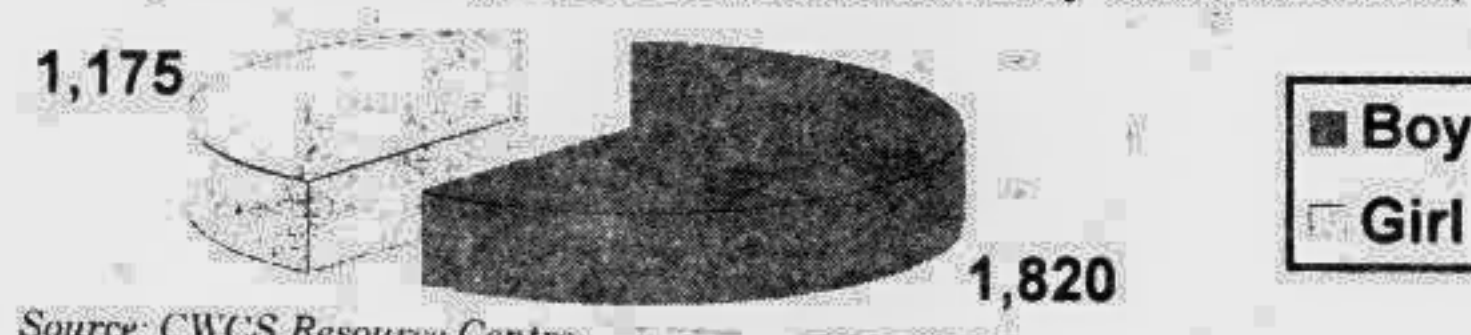
The issues of child kidnapping, selling and trafficking have recently gained considerable importance in Bangladesh. But it is impossible to determine accurately the number of victimised children. But it can be assumed that there are several hundreds of children under the age of 16 years who are being kidnapped, abducted and trafficked within the country and across borders. A joint study report prepared in 1996 by the Ministries of Home, Social Welfare and Women and Children Affairs shows that over the last five years, at least 13,220 children have been smuggled out of the country. The term 'missing' denotes a process by which there is no

trace or information about children and young girls who are the victims. They may either loose their way or contact with family members due to age or gender or they are kidnapped by agents or procurers. Many a times when a child is reported missing there is not enough evidence to determine whether he or she is the victim of foul play or just inadvertently or un-avoidably detained and may only be categorised after determining what has happened to the child. For instance a child found after wandering away from his or her parents in a shopping mall or a public place would be considered a missing child. In cases where a child is injured and cannot immediately obtain help, that child should also be considered missing until parents and or authorities can be notified of the child's whereabouts.

On the other hand, 'kidnapping' of children include all forms of abduction and capture with the intent to demand ransom, sale, exchange or use in slavery, servitude, flesh trade, organ collection, prostitution and pornography by means of violence, threat of violence or using drugs. Trafficking may be defined as, "all acts involved in kidnapping, abduction, capture, acquisition, recruitment and transportation of children and young girls within and across national borders with the intent to sell, exchange or use of any illegal purpose such as prostitution, servitude in the guise of marriage, bonded labour or sale of human by means of violence or threat of violence". Trafficking is a new form of contemporary slavery, which is a grave violation of human rights. The contributing factors are poverty, the inferior status of poverty-stricken children, the sexual abuse of girls, often by family members and the willingness of poor parents and guardians to let their children go to urban centres and neighbouring countries for economic benefits of the whole family, sometimes not knowing the grave consequences.

The continuous rise in the number of missing, kidnapped and trafficked children reported in the media over the past few years illustrates that children have become cheap commodities in the globalised market economy and testify negligence of government initiatives to address the grave situation that is prevailing.

Figure 1: Missing children by sex (January 1990-June 1998)

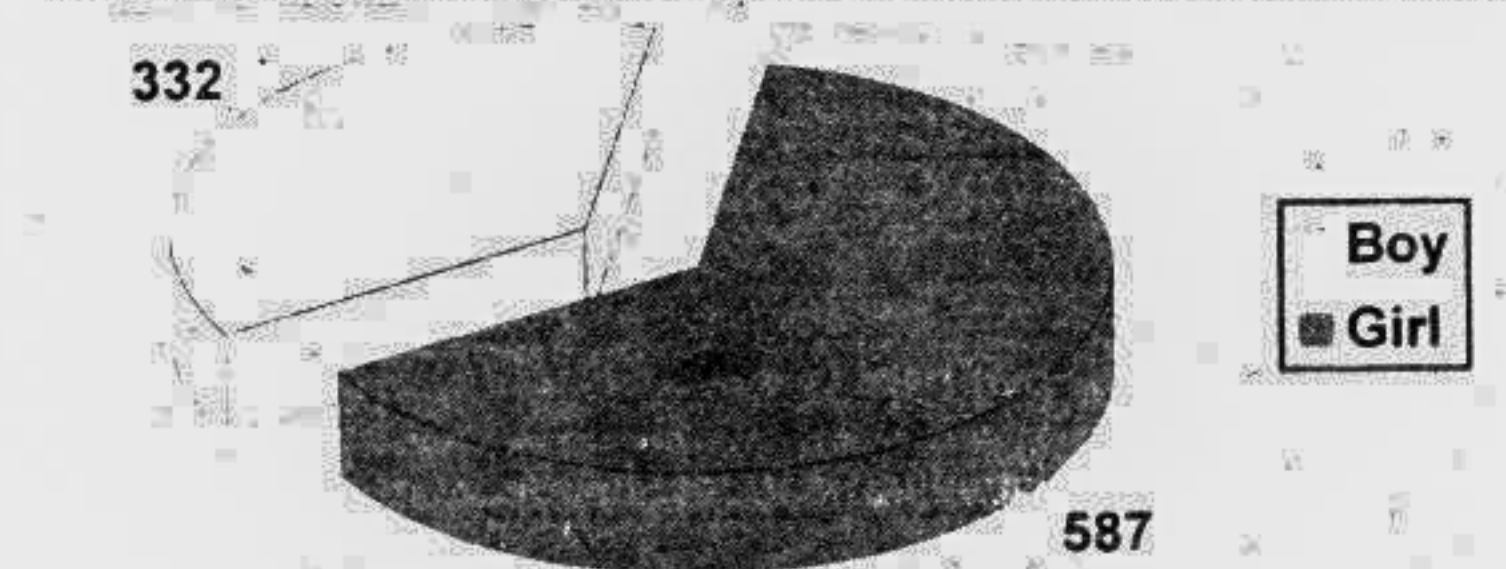


News clippings compiled by the Centre for Women and Children Studies (CWCS) revealed that about 2,995 children, of whom 1,820 were boys and 1,175 were girls were missing from January 1990 to June 1998.

On the other hand, the total figure on kidnapped children was only 919, which is less than one-third of the total number of missing children during the same period. Among the kidnapped children, 587 were girls and the remaining 332 were boys. It is interesting to note that there are more boys missing than girls, in contrast to more girls being kidnapped than boys. Boys are more active and like going to school, to market, to workplace, to visit friends, to play in public places, etc. In certain cases, young boys do not return home and are thus missing. Many a times, girls are forcibly kidnapped by mastans and sexually abused. However, the issue of boys being missing

maybe cases of kidnapping or trafficking, which is hard to uncover unless those children are found and state the real incident of what happened.

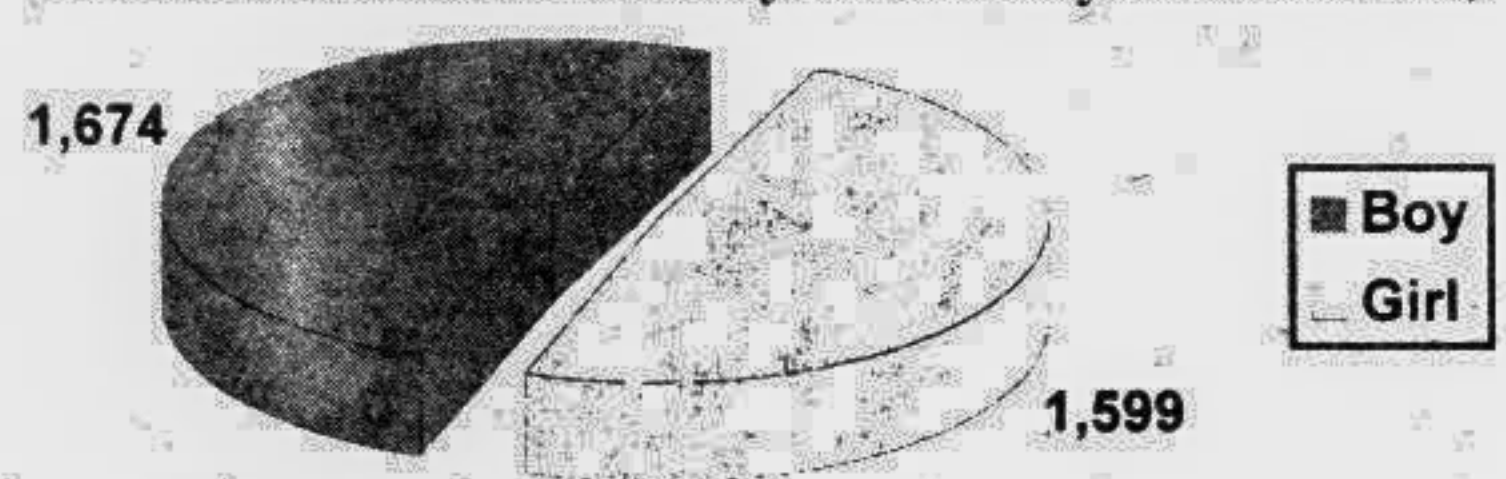
Figure 2: Kidnapped children by sex (January 1990-June 1998)



Source: CWCS Resource Centre

Unfortunately of the 2,995 missing children, only 244 were rescued, which is only 8.14 percent. As for rescuing kidnapped children, the numbers were much higher, about 574 children were rescued out of 919 kidnapped cases, which is 62.46 percent. However, the relatively high percentage of rescue work can be misleading because print media usually publishes the cases which have been apprehended by the law enforcing agencies while crossing the borders or children rescued in police raids in brothels or houses where they are trapped by kidnapers or traffickers.

Figure 3: Trafficked children by sex (January 1990-June 1998)



Source: CWCS Resource Centre

A total number of 3,273 children were trafficked, of whom 1,674 were boys and 1,599 were girls, a difference of only 75. In the case of boys, overwhelming majorities were below the age of ten years, as most of the boys are trafficked to be used as camel jockeys in the Gulf countries. The rescued record of trafficked children indicates that police and public rescued both a considerable number of child victims. Of the total 3,273 trafficked cases 3,125 were rescued, which is as high as 95.48 percent. However, the high percentage of rescue operations is due to the fact that media only document those incidents which are filed in the police station.

The most useful and successful device in addressing the issue of preventing crime against children in many developed and developing countries. The basic premise of Community Policing is that the police and the members of the community should work together to suppress crime in society. Moreover Community Policing enhances the service quality of the police where the police have become more sensitive to the specific needs of each neighbourhood.

Neighbourhood Watch scheme, on the other hand, keeps an eye out on anything or anyone suspicious in the neighbourhood. As such it is useful in retarding the incidence of strangers coming in to kidnap or allure children to be trafficked. Such scheme encourages good relationship between the police and the community.

It is our realisation that introducing Community Policing approach or forming Neighbourhood Watch at community level would be useful in curbing such heinous acts against children. Furthermore, the crucial tool to fight against such crimes is increased police action by establishing special units to deal with missing, kidnapped and trafficked children which includes prompt action, proper implementation of the existing laws, and providing safe protection to the child victims rescued. In this regard police should be trained to be child-friendly in the best interests of children.

tudes change, it is not possible to get better results despite the provisions in the laws and the Constitution. This is a vicious

circle and there must be some beginning somewhere and where else can it be more legitimate and practical in the hearts and behaviour of the 'actors' of the legal system. Hence there is no alibi or excuse available to policemen for not behaving in a manner respectful to the rights of children.

The issue of missing, kidnapping and trafficking in children should be addressed with holistic approach. Community Policing and Neighbourhood Watch have become

the most useful and successful device in addressing the issue of preventing crime against children in many developed and developing countries. The basic premise of Community Policing is that the police and the members of the community should work together to suppress crime in society. Moreover Community Policing enhances the service quality of the police where the police have become more sensitive to the specific needs of each neighbourhood.

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The authors are Professor of Sociology, DU & President, Centre for Women and Children Studies (CWCS) and Programme Officer, Centre for Women and Children Studies (CWCS) respectively.



Whither security?

— Star file photos

Set the Caged Bird Free

by M. J. H. Javed

'There is a father in every child' - so said William Wordsworth. Bibhutibhusan Bandopadhyay portrayed how creative and curious child's mind might be in the character of Apu in his masterpiece *Panther Panchali*. Rabindranath Tagore advised the junior members of the society to strike the superstitious mind of their predecessors so that the society can overcome all darkness.

RABINDRANATH Tagore rebuked the *Bangalanan* for her over affection to children - *Shat kutt shantanerey ... Rekhechho Bangalee korey Manush karont*. Love of mother for her children is universal and invincible because this is the most precious and pure gift to human beings from nature.

But what would Tagore say to the helpless mother of present Bangladesh where in the metropolitan areas they can't think of a fraction of second to let their children go free simply out of fear and insecurity? How should tiny boys and girls sing *Mora chanchal, mora uchchhal ... prokriti maia nirmal* if they are always forced to pass days and nights under tight security arranged normally by mother or in her absence any elder person forming the bastion? No scopes of flexibility in the security arrangement at home, school, way to school, playing ground (if available at all) for the bird in cage!

If you walk round the premise of any kindergarten, coaching centre or primary school of any metropolitan city in Bangladesh you just can't miss big assembly of mothers. School hour of wards has indirectly become the office hour of mothers but tragically without any office building, table, chair or file cabinet! Month after month and year after year the mother has to perform the official duty sitting down the footpath or street!

Sharmin, a mother at Mirpur, said, "I completed my masters from Dhaka University before my marriage. I had a very good job but couldn't continue after the birth of my only child initially because I had to give more time to my family. After my child's entry into a reputed school in Dhaka, which is located away from our residence, I couldn't manage any reliable person to accompany him on way to school and take care of him in my absence. If you have a glimpse of the daily newspaper you dare not send your child alone to school. I had

to abandon the ambition of a career because I have to keep an eye always on my only child." Afsana, a mother from Tejgaon, said, "It is very frustrating moment to keep on sitting down the dirty footpath for five to six hours a day. At times you have to scramble for the dirty room to sit". Rokeya, a mother from Azimpur said, "last year my younger daughter came out successful in a very competitive test for admission into a reputed school. After knowing that the school has no transport for the students, I cancelled her admission and sent her to a school in our locality which offers very sub-standard education".

Sharmin, Afsana and Rokeya share the feelings of many a mother in Dhaka City. In a free and democratic country the children are to be brought up freely but insecurity and uncertainty have gripped the society to the extent that even right to life and liberty is at stake and the unoffending masses can't even take breath freely. Children are not supposed to have any enemy because they don't side with any conflicting party still they do not have the minimum security of life on way to school, in the play ground and even at home (Shazneen in an example).

No mother can think of going outside home for household purposes (say to pay the electricity bill or to buy food or medicine) leaving the children without any sort of supervision from any responsible superior man. If the purpose in unavoidable and no elder person could be managed the mothers take the child with her or keep them under lock and key! "Last month, I and my husband attended the office, keeping our minor daughter under lock and key when my sister (who would look after our child in our absence) went to the village home. There was no alternative. The "Boss" doesn't pardon even one minute delay on the one hand; cheaters, dacoits and child-traffickers are all around on

the other" said Halima, a garments worker at Mirpur.

Children are insecure on way to school because of a great many reasons. Firstly, child-traffickers keep constant eye on your helplessness or unconsciousness. Secondly, killer trucks are always ready to take away the life of your beloved son or daughter. The truck drivers don't bother to run at high speed on roads surrounding the school.

Even school itself is insecure for boys and girls in their teens because you don't know about the nature of boy or girl with which your child mixes; whether the company is good or bad. When this question was raised, Roushan Ara, a mother from Dhanmondi, said, "One day I found my younger son crying on return from school who was then a student of class nine. I asked him repeatedly as to why he was crying. At one stage, he embraced me strongly and started crying loudly. After repeated attempts, I could know that one of his classmates who was much older than him forced him to smoke. My son can't tolerate the smell of smoke at all. He didn't show me the boy. Since then I had to accompany him on way to school everyday until his last day at school".

Kishor Kabi Sukanta Bhat-tacharya dreamt of a world liveable for the newborn child before receiving his *Chharpatri* (Transfer Certificate) thereby to become a part of history. *Tarpor hato bhishak*. But it seems that we have a strong disinclination for history and are overlooking the fact that if we fail to keep the world liveable for the child, history will not pardon us. As to what we should do as senior members of the society for ensuring the security and betterment of our children, I think, the very title of this essay may give a direction. That is, metaphorically speaking, turn the society into a sky free from hunters so that the caged bird can fly at large! Some measures should be taken immediately to free the children from

virtual captivity and their mothers from the dubious role of captors. Firstly, school authorities should arrange means of transport for the children and recruit reliable drivers and caretakers. Secondly, heavy vehicles like trucks, minibuses etc should not be allowed to ply on the roads surrounding the school particularly during school hours. Thirdly, exemplary punishment should be given to the child-traffickers. Fourthly, at least one playground should be fixed for the children in every municipal ward. Fifthly and more importantly, we elders should be more friendly and affectionate to the children.

"There is a father in every child" - so said William Wordsworth. Bibhutibhusan Bandopadhyay portrayed how creative and curious child's mind might be in the character of Apu in his masterpiece *Panther Panchali*. Rabindranath Tagore advised the junior members of the society to strike the superstitious mind of their predecessors so that the society can overcome all darkness. We cannot expect creative leadership from today's children who pass days and nights in the apparently secure four-walls of an insecure society. Can we dream of a Nazrul or a Bhasani or a Dickens from a society where hostility, mutual mistrust and personal insecurity are the only truth. We cannot hope of a future humanist from today's children who are busy only for self-preservation and who never have the opportunity of feeling the plight of toiling masses, happiness of diligent farmer, beauty of an open field or the touch of a flowing river. Can we think of a freedom fighter or peace-worker from today's children if they have to pass childhood amid *flawless security* like birds in cage? Let us dream of a world with free chirping birds!

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Sex Education in Bangladesh

by Khaleida Khatoon

Sex education is not entirely absent in Bangladesh. The entry points were Govt. sponsored aids program, health and family planning etc. Some organisations are trying to motivate the adolescents against STD and HIV-AIDS. The fact is that sex education has never been addressed to support the adolescents to develop healthy, biologically sound and socially equitable and culturally non-violent attitude towards their own and peer's sexual maturation, sexuality and sexual relationship.

ADOLESCENTS in India live in world of extraordinary dichotomy. The large joint family in which they used to live is gradually crumbling, resulting in the withering away of the support structure during the crucial phase of growing up. This phase of life is fascinating as well as a daunting process. This is especially true in the case of girls whose world gets curbed, controlled and, at the same time, complex during adolescence. This is a foreword of a booklet called 'Adolescence: Mysteries of Adolescence', produced by Voluntary Health Association of India. We think that this is a universal truth applies to all the adolescents of

different communities and countries of this world. Adolescents in our community have hardly any access to services crucial to protection from sex abuse, child pregnancy, sexually transmitted diseases and abortion when they need it. What we do is deny these basic rights and act as if this adolescent crisis does not exist in our society.

We recently undertook a research on the issues of adolescent changes, the crisis they face during this period and the process of understanding and overcoming such crisis. The research was conducted by a teachers' guide and an informative film to impart sex education in the schools. Sex education is not entirely

absent in Bangladesh. The entry points were Govt. sponsored aids program, health and family planning etc. Some organisations are trying to motivate the adolescents against STD and HIV-AIDS. The fact is that sex education has never been addressed to support the adolescents to develop healthy, biologically sound and socially equitable and culturally non-violent attitude towards their own and peer's sexual maturation, sexuality and sexual relationship.

The primary motivation of the research was to locate the positive roles of girl student in our society and how a social system can be developed to reduce violence against them in our society. We have also ob-

served that there is a silence in the area of sexual and healthy relationship of people. So another objective of the research is to initiate a healthy discourse on 'breaking the silence' on talking about sex and sexuality amongst and between educators, health promoters, policy makers, parents and adolescents.

Findings of the Research

"When I had my first period I was only 11 year old. One day when I was drenched in rainwater and was changing my cloth I noticed some blood in it. I did not know what to do. My mother saw my wet clothes and told me that it happens to all

Continued on page 7