

Children and Security-II

Imagination is more important than knowledge

—Albert Einstein

Report on Public Dialogue-II

by Nirupoma Chowdhury and Sharif Atiqur Rahman

THE society is expected to be a children-friendly one, but the reality is quite different. The truth is whenever children go out, there is every possibility that they might face a hostile environment. They are also not safe within their homes. They have become the victims of mental and physical abuse, sexual harassment, drug abuse, violence and much more. The issue is now not only about the security of the children, but the survival of the children.

With the objective of putting the above into focus the Centre for Alternatives, The British Council and The Daily Star jointly organised a "Public Dialogue on Children & Security" on September 01, 1999 at the British Council Auditorium.

This was for the children where they got a platform to speak about their problems. The response from children was tremendous. Children representing all social strata participated at the dialogue overwhelmingly and shared their views and feelings on their very own security issues. As a continuation of the process, the three organisers arranged the second public dialogue on September 06, 1999 at the same venue - this time it was for the adults. The recommendations that the children made in the earlier session were presented before the participants and a lively discussion was held on what should be done to ensure the security of our future generation. Researchers, educationists, journalists, lawyers, professionals, NGO activists, social workers, policy makers and also the parents participated in the dialogue. Children pointed out five different areas where their security is at stake - at

Defining a Child

Bangladesh was one of the first countries to ratify the Convention on the Rights of Child (CRC) in 1990. With the ratification of the agreement, Bangladesh Government approves the age limit of a child to be below eighteen. But still in some laws of Bangladesh, the age limit of a child is prescribed in different forms ranging from fourteen to sixteen years. The participants felt the need about having some uniformity in law in defining a child.

Awareness

The highest emphasis was given on creating social awareness. People realise that the security of their children is at stake, but they are not conscious that they can do a lot of things for securing their children. We have become habituated with the tendency of giving all the responsibilities on the government. But if the society becomes aware of the problems that the children face at home, in streets, at school, at work

place and public places, a positive change will take place for ensuring their security. It was observed that there is an attitude that a child cannot have any problem; this has to be changed.

Education within the Family

Nilufer Begum of Bangladesh Unnayan Parishad emphasised on proper family education for ensuring security of children. Parents should ensure that their children are getting proper attention and receiving proper education. Strong family bonds can help in doing so.

With growing number of sexual harassment against girl child and women, boys should be taught that their mother, sisters and aunts are also women;

and the latter should be treated with respect. If a person is provided with the idea of family values since his/her childhood, it will certainly help towards the creation of a much more secured society for everyone.

Farah Kabir of The British Council pointed out that sometimes in the name of disciplining the children, the parents treat them as "criminals". They become alienated from their parents and do not want to share their problems with their parents for the fear that he/she might be made responsible for the problem. Family should create space for the child where he/she can admit his/her

Neighbourhood Watch Group

Every child's mother is the most concerned and responsible adult who can take an active role in the security of the children. Arch. Shaheen Islam proposed that mothers of every neighbourhood could form a

"Neighbourhood Watch" group who will keep an eye on the security of their children of the locality. This group will work in concert with the law enforcement agencies. This will also bring a general awareness amongst the neighbours regarding the security of the children. "Neighbourhood Watch" stickers may be made, and labelled in front of the house involved in the watch.

Telephone "Hotline" and "Tele Counselling"

To enable the children from all walks of life to report of their abuse and to seek any kind of help, assistance and guidance, suggestions were made to create a 24-hour toll free telephone "Hotline". A group of private body, comprising of social workers, child psychologists, responsible police officers and caring citizens, can run this. This private group should keep this information confidential and do the needful to help the children.

It was observed that children feel hesitant to talk about their problems with the elders. But this is not the case when a child talks with another child. So children can also be involved in this "tele counselling" or "hotline" service to ensure that children can express themselves without any hesitation.

Imtiaz Ahmed of the CA suggested that some private tele communication groups (like Grammeen Phone) which have a wide network could play an active role in creating this hotline or tele counselling service.

Child Friendly Neighbourhood

Proverb says - "Example is better than precept". Mahfuz Anam of The Daily Star suggested that with the combined effort of the NGOs and the civil society, some localities can be announced as "Child Friendly Neighbourhood" which will have all kinds of arrangements for ensuring the security. A "Child Friendly Neighbourhood" will definitely encourage others to attempt such ventures and ultimately we can have a child friendly city. The participants felt that the NGOs and citizen groups should come forward with this initiative. The government can do little in this regard.

Child Trafficking and Kidnapping

Child trafficking has become a major problem for Bangladesh. In several cases children were recovered from the child traffickers from within and outside the country. Ishrat Shamim of the Centre for Women and Children Studies pointed out that there are many more cases of kidnapping

and missing children, besides the reported ones. Their research found that the rate of recovery of the missing children is only 8%. She suggested that the community should co-operate with the law enforcement agencies in preventing these incidents. "Neighbourhood Watch" or "Community Policing" can be a possible solution to the problem. A social movement can be started with a slogan for the children "Don't talk to strangers". A "Missing Squad" can be formed comprising the members of the community who will act on receiving any information about missing child within the locality. Imitiaz Ahmed added that an emergency number like "999" as in the western countries can also help the children to get assistance whenever they are in trouble.

To overcome this, children should be provided with sex education in the name of "Know Your Body". There should be a teacher's manual and instrumental film as in many western countries to provide the adolescent children with basic ideas about their body and its transformation. Of course, these materials should be culture sensitive. Besides, parents must be involved in this process. It is not possible to bring these parents to schools to teach them how to face the questions of adolescent child, but through community counselling this can easily be achieved. Both Khaleda and Khurshid emphasised on associations like Scouts and Girls Guide in providing such education for the children.

Emotional Security

The participants at the public dialogue also emphasised on the emotional security of the children. Khurshid Ahmed of Aar O Shalish Kendra pointed out that at various points children feel insecure. They can be physically or verbally punished at home or school; they can be traumatised by unhealthy family environment; sometimes they feel helpless in a broken family; and sometimes they can face some unpleasant situations at streets or public places. At that moment they need somebody to talk to, to share their feeling. In most cases parents do not want to listen to such problems, and if the child face emotional insecurity caused by their parents it is most unlikely that they would talk with their parents.

Education on Child Rights

Ekram Hossain of Steps towards Development suggested that the children should be informed about their rights. The Convention of the Rights of the Child (CRC) can be included in the school curriculum of basic education. This will create awareness among the children, as well as among the teachers and parents about the issues of child rights. Everybody should feel and know that irrespective of religion, sex, education, and wealth all children are equal.

Role of Media

It was unanimously suggested at the public dialogue that media, especially the electronic media could play a vital role in creating awareness on security of children. There can be a TV serial or Radio programme, incorporating issues of children. It should be a long-term serial running over years and broadcast/telecast once a week at prime time. The serial can be written by a popular play writer, produced by a famous producer and performed by popular artists. There can be programmes, which will create awareness more directly and

Education on Sex

During the adolescent period children start becoming sexually conscious. At this age they are confronted with various questions of which they do not have any answer. Sometimes they ask their closest family members i.e. parents, elder brothers or sisters with complete innocence. But through the answers they usually acquire either a wrong impression or get the feeling that these

questions can never be asked. This creates hesitation within the girls while boys feel a kind of aggression. Adv. Khaleda Khatoon, who is working on the crisis of adolescent children, pointed out that as children fail to communicate with their parents or close relatives, they look for answers among their friends who also have been similarly treated. So they grow up without any respect for the opposite gender. The research has found that boys grow up with ideas like "girls are fools" or "boys can punish girls". Besides, these young-uninformed children sometimes even fail to recognise that they have been sexually abused.

more precisely. It should talk about the problems of the children, and at the same time give the parents the guideline to tackle the crisis they sometimes face with their children. Most of the print media are now having a weekly children's page. There can as well be a daily column on children and their problems. Media can even start a campaign with the slogan "Children First..."

Besides all these, it has to be monitored that how media is performing its role. There is the National Action Plan, but how far it is being implemented that should be monitored by the civil society and reported to the policy makers.

Educating and Re-thinking about the Law Enforcement Agencies

Law enforcement agencies are supposed to be that group where people in danger can get help. But in our country, there are strong allegations that law enforcement agencies are not properly educated in dealing with children and there are several incidents where some members of law enforcement agencies were engaged in sexual abuse of children. Due to this, some of the speakers suggested that the total police force should be reshaped. A suggestion was given that as about 50% of our total population is women, the police force should also represent that ratio. This will contribute towards the safety of a child. Some suggested training of the members of the law enforcement agencies on CRC. The process of training the members of law enforcement agencies has already started. But this should be made more intensive and monitored carefully. Training and education should be provided not only for the officers, but also for the other police.

Training on Self Defence

Although it is in the training manual that teachers should not abuse a child verbally or physically, but the reality is that in most of the schools in rural areas, sometimes even in urban schools, teachers use their sticks in making a student "more human". This creates a kind of fear in the minds of children about the school and they ultimately loose their interests about their studies.

There should be proper monitoring that such events do not take place in schools. There can be a social worker in each school who would be involved in the monitoring of these incidents and other issues concerning children rights.

Security at School

School authorities can send a letter to the parents of each and every newly admitted student, which will contain messages on issues like child right and children security. This will at least create a kind of awareness among the parents about the security of their children.

Security at Work Place

Though according to the Herkin's Bill, children below 18 are not allowed to engage in works in garments or in any other establishment. But the reality is that this law is not followed at all. Children are engaged in all sorts of works including the health hazardous ones. Extra care should be taken for the children working in these places.

Security at Work Place

In most of the cases there is no arrangement for creche for the working mothers. Without a creche, it is virtually impossible for a working mother to continue their job simultaneously.

Counselling of Street Children

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Role of Media

Children often feel insecure to move alone in the streets and public places. If the child is trained in self-defence methods, he/she can at least try to save himself/herself in times of crisis. Some speakers at the dialogue suggested that children should receive compulsory training on self-defence in schools to ensure their security. In fact, some schools like Onnesha are already providing this training to its students.

There were arguments both for and against. Some pointed out that training children on self-defence might aggregate the violence in society. But the counter argument was that training on self-defence i.e. martial art is purely devoted for defensive purpose and with a non-violent approach.

Long Time Measures

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How secure is their future?

Star file photo

The topic of our next issue is: **Health and Hospital**. Creative suggestions are invited from our esteemed readers. Please send your materials to: Dr Imtiaz Ahmed, Executive Director, Centre for Alternatives, Room No 431, Lecture Theatre, Arts Building, Dhaka University, Dhaka-1000. Tel: 9661900-19 Ext 4550; Fax: (8802) 836769; E-mail: imtiaz@bangla.net.