

# 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

home, at streets, at school, at work place and at public places. But the discussion also touched upon the other issues that concern the security of children.

At the beginning of the dialogue, Imtiaz Ahmed of the Centre for Alternatives pointed out two important issues. Firstly, the goal of the dialogue was to formulate some concrete plans or policies, which would later be forwarded to the policy makers; secondly, the dialogue would try to find some alternative ideas which the civil society itself can perform without burdening the already "overburdened government".

The participants of the public dialogue came up with the following ideas:

### 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 faults.

### 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 Grammen 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. Imtiaz 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.

### Emotional Security

The participants at the public dialogue also emphasised on the emotional security of the children. Khurshid Ahmed of Ain 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.

In such a situation, a telephone "Hotline" can be very effective where children can express their mental agony. Khurshid Ahmed also emphasised on counselling of parents of how to listen to their children. She suggested that counselling sessions for parents could be arranged in colonies or high rise apartments where parents can be completely reformed in their approach about the upbringing of their children. This would create a space for the emotional security of a child.

### 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. Khaleida Khatun, 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.

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 Khaleida and Khurshid emphasised on associations like Scouts and Girls Guide in providing such education for the children.

### 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

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 the ordinary policemen.

### Training on Self Defence

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 aggravate 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.

### Counselling of Street Children

There are many children who take to the wrong path in life not willingly, but due to the sheer force of circumstances. These children are in such a mental trauma that they feel

has said that Dhaka is one of the most polluted cities of the world. We cannot accept our children growing up in and suffering from this polluted environment. Time has come that each and every citizen should become aware about the environmental issues.

Children have a tendency to accept the words of their teachers more than their parents. Tasneem Ferzana of Bangladesh Environmental Lawyers' Association suggested that if teachers in school taught the children about the environmental issues, children will take it seriously and they will become aware of environmental pollution. If these children are provided with municipal/city corporation laws about keeping their environment unpolluted, their environmental safety will be ensured.

### No Smoking Campaign

According to the law in Bangladesh the sale of cigarette to children below 16 years is a punishable offence. But now even some school-going children have become habituated in smoking, which ultimately endangers their health. Schools can take up "no smoking" campaigns very easily and try to make the children aware about the bad effects of smoking.

### Security at School

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 lose 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.

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.

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

## Sex Education in Bangladesh

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The girls even month, I was shocked. At the beginning, I used to feel uncomfortable and embarrassed. Slowly I started adjusting myself with the situation. What bothered me most is that my mother and my elder sister behaviour suddenly changed. They did not allow me to go on the roof; I was not even allowed to talk to my brother's friend and other young relatives. I felt like a caged bird. Is there anything wrong in growing up?"

The above is a case study of an adolescent girl of a Bangla medium school of Dhaka.

Adolescents are in a period of rapid physical, sexual and emotional development. For about five to six years of our life most of us suffer from various emotional and psychological problems such as fear, confusion, doubts and anxieties due to physical change with development of the primary and secondary sex characteristics along with maturation of reproductive

functioning. Due to general lack of information on physical change and reproductive health, they have hard time coping with such problems. They also become isolated when these changes are occurring and the basic counselling becomes a pressing need.

To get the information from the teenagers we organised focus group discussion, interviews and workshop with the students of mainstream English and Bangla medium schools of Dhaka City. The participants were boys and girl students, male and female teachers of different schools. The findings were fascinating and here I would like to present some of it.

In the interviews adolescent children expressed the need for factual information about physical change and reproductive health. Most of them pointed out that the schools could be the premise of such education. To them it is the most neutral space for all the parties to discuss these issues openly with the support of medical professionals.

When an adolescent boy reaches his puberty he has many external physical changes such as wet dream (nocturnal emissions), crack voice, growing pubic hair on different parts of the body etc. When a girl reaches her puberty she has many physical changes such as menstruation or period, developed breast etc. Some changes are common among girls and boys, or instance, growth of hair in private parts and armpit (pubic hair), pimple and oily skin, height etc. These changes take place together with the internal biological change. The reproductive system of man and woman is a reason for these different and common secondary sexual characteristics of a human being.

In the beginning of our interaction with the children most of them were shy and remained quiet/silent but after a while the discussion generated in full motion. Most of them said that they did not have any information or knowledge about these changes. Girls when they had their first period got panicked/frightened and asked mother, elder sister but

came to know that it happens to every girl without any further explanation. A boy when he had his first experience of wet dream wanted to ask parents, especially the father, but got warned and was told not to discuss about it or talk about it. It is a bad thing. Later on they went to ask those who work in their households. They received wrong information and faced crisis and in many cases they were sexually abused by them.

Boys are more curious to know about their bodily change and to meet their curiosity they read porno magazine and news about rape in the newspapers. They said this was their first encounter regarding knowledge on sex and sexuality. Apparently, it seems that girls have much easy access to information from their mother, than most of the boys.

During the interaction students had specific questions. Girls asked questions like why they bleed and while having period why they feel hesitant to go out of the house. Girls never found any answer as to why they bleed except one girl said that her doctor mother explained the reason of bleeding to her. In most of the cases a lot of constraints are created for a girl during the adolescent time, for instance, they cannot go anywhere whereas a boy can move about. This sudden imposition by parents makes very little meaning to them. Mothers said the constant insecurity of girl child being sexually abused is the reason to put all kinds of restrictions on them.

### Myth and Reality

Misconceptions about certain normal sexual behaviour already predominantly exist in the society, especially about the menstruation and wet dream and masturbation. It gets reinforced when children are also misinformed and misguided about these biological and physiological processes of a human body. Many girls started believing that menstruation is an illness and some of the girls thought it as to be a serious disease. Boys were given wrong information that wet dream and masturbation are disease and a bad practice and if they have it there is something wrong with them. It is dirty and should not be discussed or talked about. Slowly and gradually they start to develop guilty feelings about it. Some misconceptions, which still exist, are if a boy kisses a girl, the girl would get pregnant, if menstruation stops the girl would get pregnant. Pregnancy and giving birth is an unclean thing, girl/women loose blood and it is a painful experience. Boys believed that only men/boys can have sexual pleasure; woman experience pain during sexual relationship. It is important to demystify these myths and they have to know that these are normal biological and physical behaviour of a human body and this happens due to the production of different hormones in the body.

### Boys and Girls Responded Differently

Boys (12-16) said that when they see a girl they get sexually attracted towards the girl but do not know how to explain this behaviour. In many interviews boys said that sexual pleasure is

only for men and women only get pain and they must suffer. This is an alarming finding which can increase violence against women in the society. They also believe that girls are stupid and naive and fight most of the times. The finding on their first encounter of sex and sexuality through reading news of rape incidents and pornography can easily trigger the male aggression towards women (here we are talking about the boys who are 10 to 16 year old). The students were mostly from middle and upper middle class families and it is shocking to find out that they hold such views about girls.

The girls said they feel attracted and if they want to express their feelings they are not allowed to and usually parents hate it. They asked why boys at similar age can play, jump and go out to play in an open place and they have to stay at home.

### Teacher, Parent's Attitude

While we had workshops with students we also had discussions and workshops with the teachers and parents. In most of the cases it was found that the parents only want their children to learn about personal hygiene and reproductive health, not more than that. There was another amazing finding that many male teachers were extremely negative about sex education, while female teachers wholeheartedly supported the initiative of educating children on reproductive health and sexuality (sexual anatomy). They also felt the need to incorporate a curriculum on sex education in the school syllabus.

### Conclusion

In the end I would like to add that the objective of the research was to find out the existing views and assumption on the reproductive system and sexual behaviour of the adolescent children of the mainstream schools. On the basis of these findings we are going to produce an informative film which would be used by the school authorities for imparting sex education.

Fuad Chowdhury who has experience of producing several educational films in the USA, Canada and India would produce this film.

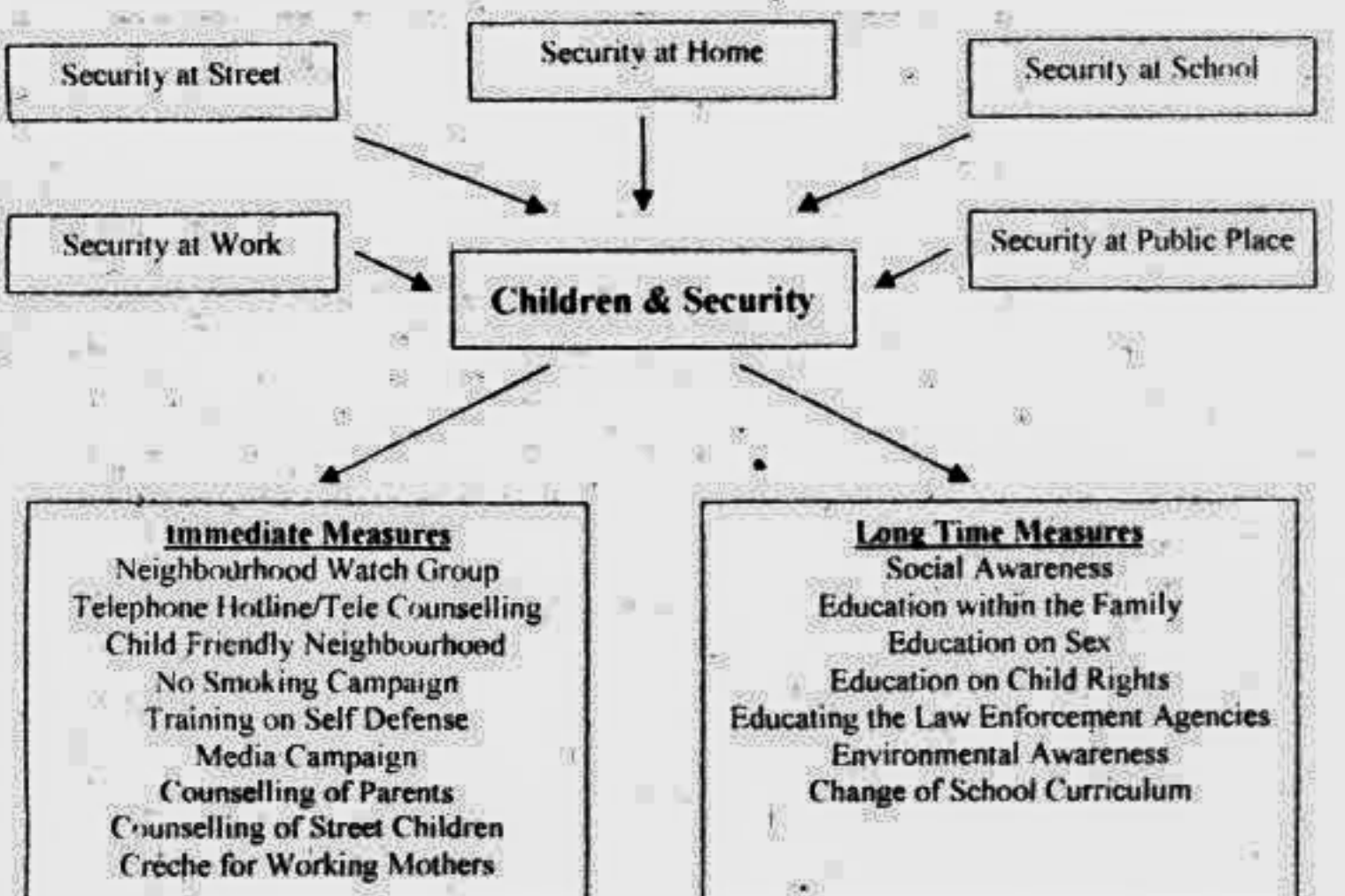
We strongly believe that sex education will enhance the self-confidence of the adolescent girls and boys regarding their own bodies, self-image, especially it would help them to recognise and acknowledge the biological similarities and dissimilarities between the sexes. The knowledge acquired will help to demystify their notions about sexuality, and help them to deal with their own and their peer's body processes with renewed confidence. It will enhance the dignity and self-respect of adolescent girls so that they are able to recognise and resist acts of sexual violence and harassment against them. It will help adolescent girls to articulate the violations against their bodies and their various health emotional and sexual related problems that they may be facing.

The author is an advocate and free lance researcher.



How secure is their future?

— Star file photo



that there is no way out. But through counselling these children can be brought back to normal life. They can express their feelings and problems. Through counselling they can be convinced that their lives are not yet finished. They can rebuild it. Some NGOs working on street children strongly suggested on counselling to bring them back to normal path of life.

### Awareness about Environment

Bangladesh is an over populated country and the level of environmental pollution is very high. A World Bank report

The participants agreed that all the ideas may not be implemented overnight. Therefore Mahfuz Anam of The Daily Star suggested the need to identify the actions/plans that need immediate implementation. Others are to be implemented gradually and phase by phase for the future safety of children. But, today or tomorrow these things need to be taken care of, if we want to see our future generation secured and protected.

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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.