


# Alternatives

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## Can You Spare a Dream for All?

From the Alternatives Desk

As the millennium bug engulfed and bit the world with all its might, we at the CA wondered and watched with much dismay, anguish and to some extent agony the slide from one millennium into another without any dreams, visions, hopes and aspirations for the new millennium on the part of our polity. True there was no lack of celebrations, of partying, of commercialising of the millennium and above all of polemics and rhetorics. But in this entire doldrum what was strikingly missing was an endeavour for change. Did we not greet the millennium with violence against an innocent woman whose only fault lay in wanting to enjoy the millennium celebrations at the highest educational institute of the country?

The print as well as the electronic media did not lag behind. Editorials and eminent personalities reflected on their expectations from the new millennium. Surprisingly enough one again is struck by the lack of imagination and vision in these reflections. While deliberating upon the 21st century they somehow could not come out of the ethos, values and paradigms of the 20th century. Must we then remain imprisoned in the 20th century that has given us two world wars, untold miseries, violence and a nuclear world?

As a marked departure from the norm, the CA felt the need to reflect on the vision and imagination of the common people, who indeed will live through the trial and tribulations of the new millennium. Here again we got stuck for nearly two months as the writings that we received remained imprisoned within the vortex of the 20th century. Finally the CA commissioned its research interns to explore into the dreams, hopes and aspirations of the downtrodden and deprived ones in the new millennium. Yes they have not ceased to dream. But in order to change their dreams into reality we all need to dream and work together. We must have the vision and imagination to challenge, rethink and redesign our society. With this objective in view the CA is planning to hold a series of public dialogues on pressing issues both at home and abroad. These include: *Denuclearized South Asia; Party Democracy; Reinventing the Parliament; Separation of Power; Empowering the Election Commission; Reinventing Student Politics; and Democratizing the Audio and Visual Media*, all with particular reference to Bangladesh. We invite our esteemed readers to participate with us in this endeavour.

## Child Labour in the New Millennium

by K. N. M. Hossainul Haque

The child labourers face multiple problems. They are most vulnerable to job related hazards and most prone to accidents and injuries. They are often low paid and abused by elders in the workplace. Most working children have weak food security.

It was around 12 o'clock midnight, 31st December, 1999. While the rich Gulshan kids were welcoming the new millennium through various celebrations, another Gulshan resident was not that fortunate. Tuli, a young industrial worker residing in Gulshan lake slum was in no mood of celebrating the new millennium after a long day of back-breaking work. Rather, she preferred to have a deep sleep so that the following day she could engage in life struggle with renewed vigour. Besides the new millennium was apparently of no significance to her. For her, the first day of the new millennium would be another monotonous routine of dawn to dusk hard labour like the days of the previous millennium.

Tuli, Jasim, Khaled, Fatema all are child workers and share more or less the same reaction. Jasim, a canteen boy feels that last year was bad and this year will be worse. However, the most interesting thing is, though they know about the arrival of a New Year. They do not understand at all the millennium thing that had apparently engulfed 'civilised' world.

In the current write up, I am going to shed light on the current state of child labour in Bangladesh and the kind of attention it requires in the new millennium.

There are about 7 million working children in Bangladesh aged between 5-14. This accounts for 20 percent of all children in this age group and 12 percent of the labour force. According to the Labour Force Survey (LFS) of 1990-91, 65 percent were male and 36 percent were female. Though child labourers are found to work in all sectors of economy and in all types of economic activities, they predominate in the informal sector consisting of agriculture, small enterprises, industries, various trades and services. Of them, 27 types of economic activities are considered 'hazardous'.

Bangladesh is a small country of 130 million people. Our per capita income is \$ 210. It is one of the ten least of the least developed countries. Because of disadvantaged economy, job opportunity is very limited. Generally, large number of elders are unemployed and those who are employed are often low paid. Therefore, children of poor families have to start working in underage to lessen the burden of the family. Therefore, most child workers are either school dropouts or have never attended school.

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Fourthly, indiscriminate implementation of child labourer's rights as both children and labourers. All labour unions should have wings exclusively for looking after the interests of child labourers.

We are used to hearing different types of rhetorical slogans in the last millennium. These promised the attainment of health/education for all by 2000. But none of these could be achieved. Those who are thinking of eliminating child labour shortly should know that still there is no indication of drastic change in the socio-economic condition of developing countries including Bangladesh. There is thus no possibility of outdating child labour in near future. We should therefore put our efforts on improving their lot i.e. their health, education, nutrition, security, entertainment etc. Only this way we can bring a qualitative change in the life of working children and make the new millennium meaningful for them.

Secondly, a system of health care should be installed for child labourers. They should be subject to regular health check-up and free treatment.

Thirdly, child labourers should be given safety training and safety gear. There should be an appropriate insurance system to cover them during any accident.

First of all there should be a national school education system that will render technical training along with general education. This will discourage them from dropping out as they will not have to be anxious about employment. The technical training will well-equip them for the job market.

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It hurts in the eye....



and in the heart

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## Thoughts for the Domestic Workers in the New Millennium

by Sharif Atiqur Rahman

If every family can bring change in the life of a single domestic worker, the aggregate will bring the change in the lives of millions. Our consciousness about the society can change the lot of a professional group. Changing the lots of Mariam, Tayub, Noori, Sohel may not be a big contribution towards the society if we look separately. But as a whole, it is changing the lot of the nation. Besides the individual efforts, concerned parts of the government and non-governmental organisations have to be more active in protecting their rights and making the people aware of the rights of domestic workers.



What happens out of the kitchen can only be seen, not experienced

She is Mariam - just 15 years old. But her responsibility is similar to an adult. Mariam is serving as a domestic worker in an apartment at the Bangla Motor area. She has to clean the whole house, cook food for the family of five members and also go to the market for buying the grocery. Her working hour is from six in the morning till midnight. Mariam receives a salary of Tk 200.00 per month with food, barely a space in the store to sleep and a new dress on the occasion of Eid. She has never enjoyed the liberty of spending her own hard-earned money. Her mother comes on the very first day of the month and receives the money, which contributes one-fourth of the total earning of her five member family. Mariam has no holiday, no time of her own. The only time she enjoys is when all the family members go out for a party or for any other purpose.

While living such a life devoid of leisure, entertainment and education, it is natural that the 'new millennium' would bring little meaning to her. When asked about her feeling about the new millennium, she replied with a question - 'shahasrabda abar ki?' (what is it this 'millennium'?) I explained it to her, but failed to make her understand what could be special about this. It is just like all other years, which she has passed in her short span of life. She has no special dream, no expectations for the new millennium. Yes, she has dreams like getting the opportunity to go to school, to play with her friends, to buy and taste all the beautiful things of life. But these are like utopian ideas to her - she knows deep inside her that these will never come true in her life.

But Jahanara of Zigatola area thinks quite differently. Her mother serves as a domestic worker. She also works in the same household. But she is blessed with the opportunity to go to school. Her only duty at home is to clean it. Her mother looks after the cooking. She has her personal leisure time. She celebrated the new millennium with her friends in the school. All these have been possible due to the conscious and sympathetic attitude of Jahanara's employer. The family treats Jahanara as one of them. This enabled her to have an outlook towards life completely different from that of Mariam. She has a dream for her own life. She wishes to study in the university and have a job that is socially recognised and acclaimed, like working as a social worker for the improvement of the fates of thousands of domestic workers. Her dream for the new millennium is to see the change in the society where dignity of labour is established.

She does not have any disrespect about her mother's profession, but she feels sad and angry at the same time, as nobody seems to recognise domestic workers as a professional group.

Mariam and Jahanara - both are of same age. But life has created a vast distance between them. One is completely unaware of her future, while the other is dreaming for a glowing tomorrow. One has no scope for education, no experience of beauties of life. She probably has to bear the hardship for the whole of her life. The other hopes for higher education and better job. I asked them both what they are thinking about their marriage and family life. Both of them blushed. Mariam thinks that her mother will decide whom to marry - probably a rickshaw-puller or at best a peon of some office. Her expectations are not beyond that. For Jahanara, her dream person is someone with education and culture. She is optimistic about her coming days.

The life of Jahanara is in fact an exception compared to the thousands of domestic

workers serving in our household. Majority of them are looking towards future with a 'vision' similar to Mariam's. Tayub All of Central Road is working in the same household for the last 35 years - he is now 45. He is completely satisfied with his life with only one regret - he does not have any family life; he got married twice in life, but in both the cases the marriage ended in separation. He is illiterate and surprisingly he himself admitted that he never had the will to learn either to read or to write. Tayub was satisfied with having enough food, a place to live and a monthly salary (how little the amount is!) - he was afraid that if he learnt to read or write, he would be asked to get some office job. It seems that Tayub is afraid of taking the responsibility of life. He has no dream for the new millennium. While he was asked about his future, as he has none to depend on, Tayub was confident that his employer or their children would take care of him in his old age. Similarly, Noori of Gulshan is the mother of three children. Her first husband died when she was 26. Later she got

married with an auto-rickshaw driver who left her within six months. She works on contract basis in three households. The struggles of life have made her forget to dream. Once she had dream of a happy life without poverty. She is aware of the importance of education in life. But her sweat earned 1000 taka is not enough to feed the four mouths. She has to send her son of 8 years to a garage. Her eldest daughter of 10 took her mother's profession. The youngest one of 7 years of age has become a 'tokai'. The only expectation Noori has in this new millennium is that her children will be able to maintain a decent life. They will have a happy life. Another domestic worker Sohel, wants to learn how to read and write. But he does not get the scope to go to school. He dreams for those days when he will have the opportunity to become literate.

Let us put them together:

Mariam, Tayub, Noori, Sohel - all of them live around us. They are the ones without whom we face all sorts of difficulties in maintaining our day to day activities. We depend

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upon the services they provide the society and us. But we have failed to give proper recognition towards their service. They are not recognised as a professional group. They are ill paid, moreover they are deprived of the simplest rights enjoyed even by a day labourer. Many of them have to work from early morning till midnight. But they are provided with the food, which is left over. They are given the space in the house which is the most unhygienic to live in. Sheer poverty compels them to accept all these. They lose all their hopes, dreams and aspirations. Even an event that occurs once in a thousand years does not mean anything special to them. The experience of Jahanara is very rare to occur in their poverty stricken lives. But the case of Jahanara proves that a sympathetic attitude of the well off part of the society can make a difference. The scope for education, the polite attitude of the employer's family has prevented Jahanara from becoming apathetic like others. She has dreams, she has the will power to turn those dreams into reality. It is the well to do part of the

society that can make a change. Whenever we talk about any problem, we seem to depend upon the government as if we do not have any responsibility towards the society. Let us not wait for the government to act. Let us act within our own house. We can be more sympathetic towards this working group. Sometimes they are treated worse than the beggars. But they are the one who are trying to earn their livelihood by depending upon their own labour, not upon the kindness of others.

The very first thing that needs to be done is to give recognition as a separate professional group. Then we will be able to understand their problems. The first step towards this can be taken by stopping to call them as 'servants'. We often refer to terms like 'servant's room', 'servant's family'. There is a need to change this attitude. They may not be entitled to get rich food all the time, but certainly they do not deserve the left overs. It may not be possible for all the households to have a separate room for them, but giving them clean and comfortable place to sleep in is not a big ask. If we have domestic workers who are of school going age, we should try to send them to school and arrange their responsibilities enabling them the time to study. If it is not possible for any reason, any one of the family members can spend an hour daily to teach them. We need recreation and entertainment for ourselves. Their hearts also cry for a leisure time. They should get the opportunity for their recreation. Sometimes they do misbehave and at times they are dishonest. In most of the cases we try to solve the problem either by abusing them physically or by firing them from the job. We should not forget that they come from extreme poverty; nobody has taught them right and wrong. We should try to teach social manners to them. This will prevent a boy or a girl from getting spoiled.

If every family can bring change in the life of a single domestic worker, the aggregate will bring the change in the lives of millions. Our consciousness about the society can change the lot of a professional group. Changing the lots of Mariam, Tayub, Noori, Sohel may not be a big contribution towards the society if we look separately. But as a whole, it is changing the lot of the nation. Besides the individual efforts, concerned parts of the government and non-governmental organisations have to be more active in protecting their rights and making the people aware of the rights of domestic workers.

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