

HUMAN RIGHTS *monitor*

Harassment and hazards of working women in Bangladesh

MAHFUZUR RAHMAN WITH REZAUL KARIM

ANY working mothers have to leave their jobs for inadequate maternity leave and lack of day-care centres in their offices in Bangladesh. Government Service Rules in Bangladesh permit a lactating mother to enjoy maximum three-month maternity leave, which doctors and human rights activists say is not enough.

Rebecca Sultana had a difficult choice: to stay home to breast-feed her four-month-old baby and leave her job as senior officer at a bank. Keeping the job at that point meant depriving her baby of breast milk. The 31-year-old Rebecca, who delayed her marriage in order to make a career in banking, was unable to continue her job, as there was none in her house to take care of her infant.

Canada and some African countries offer six-month maternity leave to working women. It is four months in Europe, USA and in neighbouring India. In most developed countries, employers provide day-care centres for working mothers of small kids.

When Monira Hossain gave birth to her first child four years ago she could enjoy only three months maternity leave. Apart from the fact that the time period was inadequate there was one more problem the leave had to be divided between an equal period before and after the delivery - forty-five days before the childbirth and 45 days after the delivery. "Four years ago I wanted to spend the entire maternity leave after the childbirth as I hardly had any health problem during the pregnancy and since it was my first child I wanted to spend more time with the child after the delivery," said Monira, now 29 and an office assistant at a government office.

Monira went to hospital last week to deliver her second child. She was more relaxed this time because of a new government order of July 7, 2001 that gave working women four months of maternity leave. A special feature of the new order is that, mothers of new-born babies are free to take this leave at a time. They do not have to divide the time period before or after the delivery. In case of her second child, Monira would prefer to enjoy the entire maternity leave after the childbirth.

Working women and transport hazard

Women who have to avail the public transports, particularly buses know what they have to go through everyday, during each ride. Most of the time, women are refused by the conductors of the buses to get on the bus on grounds of lack of rooms. Once the female passengers get in to the bus they find themselves standing as seats reserved for them are occupied by the male passengers. Not only that, if the female passengers want to sit in seats other than those reserved for women, then they face protests from their righteous male counterparts. Apart from the 'seat-harassment' in a crowded bus a woman goes through many unutterable experiences.

Most of the working women are from middle and lower-middle class families, so they have no other means but to avail bus, minibus or tempo to reach their workplaces. Most women prefer bus because tempo ride is comparatively expensive.

Nowadays, most of the buses and minibuses in the city operate on direct routes. Only a few buses halt at the fixed stoppages, unable to cope with the heavy rush of passengers. At present, some 500 buses and 100 minibuses are plying in the capital (before the recent government decision not to allow the old buses to ply in the capital streets), which are extremely inadequate to meet growing transportation needs of a city of about nine million people.

According to an official at the Bangladesh Road Transport Corporation (BRTC), the present requirement for transport in the city is estimated at 4,000 against the existing poor number, majority of which are not quality transports.

Considering the problems of female passengers, the BRTC introduced buses for women on two routes in 1990, but those operated for only eight months. The authorities could not continue the service as it was proved commercially non-viable.

Another BRTC official informed that some 94 buses and a few double-deckers under their City Service and City Circular Service are operating on different routes in the capital, which are not enough to meet the needs.

"We have a plan to introduce more buses in the city so that middle-class people, especially the women community, can get relief. So, a good number of buses and double-deckers will be imported soon," he said.

Under the World Bank's Dhaka Urban Transport Project (DUTP), premium bus, maxi services have been introduced in the city few years back. The project with a total financial involvement of 124.7 million US dollars was aimed at improving the city's public transport network.

According to officials, the project will streamline the mass transport facilities with particular emphasis on increasing the number of vehicles in private sector. A project preparatory mission of the World Bank recommended a pilot scheme for some premium service bus routes.

But not every one is happy with the new premier routes. "They are not helpful for the middle and lower-middle class people like me because their

higher fares are not affordable for us," said Rahima.

Nari Uddug Kendra, a leading NGO, has recently interviewed 1900 female commuters to know their views about the problem. The survey produced a unanimous recommendation that the authorities must operate more buses, including double-deckers. Introduction of separate buses for women was another suggested solution.

Recently, the BRTC has again introduced buses exclusively for women on five different routes of Dhaka City. However, sometimes men are seen travelling in the buses, as bus conductors cannot resist them. Meanwhile, Communications Minister Barrister Nazmul Huda has assured to raise the number of buses for women passengers to ensure their safe journey. But women commuters said the situation would not improve unless a systematic and effective service is introduced.

BRTC officials said they have taken initiatives to improve the situation by organising seminars and workshops to work out solutions to the transport problem of urban women, particularly in the capital city.

Harassment in transfer

Shamsun Nahar, a young nurse, reluctantly accepted her transfer from Dhaka Medical College Hospital (DMCH) to the island town of Sandwip, in 1999. At Sandwip Hospital, although she had been transferred as nurse but she has no house to stay.

For weeks she slept on a hospital bed before being permitted to lodge in the drawing room at the house of a hospital clerk with condition she could not share the bathroom. One day she was even attacked by some local thugs for unknown reasons. Nahar is now back to the DMCH. She has learned enough about miseries of nurses who work outside Dhaka.

"I was not happy at the transfer to a remote island. But I thought it's duty of a nurse to take care of patients even at a village. What I wonder now is why they must send a woman to a place where they have no accommodation facilities to offer her," she said with her voice tinged with bitterness.

Nahar alleged that she had endured harassment from the authorities to cling to the job, which is glorified as a noble service to the sick. She narrated, "In 1984 I was suspended by the authorities without valid reasons. None of my colleagues came forward in aid of me. I had to sell my own blood at that time to buy food."

Bangladesh has nurses inadequate less than requirement. Yet, there are thousands of trained nurses without jobs. And those who have jobs are not always treated well. Nahar is one of them.

More disgracing is that there are some doctors and senior nurses who force the nurses to do their personal jobs in addition to their regular office work.

Women in labour sector

According to Steps Towards Development, a non-government organisation, women account for 50 percent of the country's urban construction workers. This is somewhat unusual because the country's latest labour force survey (1990-91) says women account for only 9 percent of the labour force.

Despite increased jobs in villages, a large number of poor women come to cities in search of jobs. Many of them are either widows or abandoned by their husbands. Construction work is one of the easily available alternatives since there is a high growth in this sector. These helpless women agree to work with low pay. They cannot afford any bargain.

Women labours are deliberately deprived of equal and equitable pay at the day labour sector. Despite equal labour they are not paid equally as their male counterparts. There are other hazards in their workplaces. "We are harassed by our contractors and male workers in many ways. The contractors also try to lure us with indecent proposals" said one of the female day labours.

According to ILO Convention, men and women are supposed to receive equal wage for equal job. However, in Bangladesh few have respect to the convention.

Emphasising the importance of formulating more effective laws to offset the discriminatory attitude towards female workers, an official of Steps Towards Development says the country's Labour Law 1969 and Factory Act 1965, which are still in force, have no mention about the rights of women workers. The female workers, she says, have to give up their jobs when they become pregnant as they are considered as day-labourers, worsening their condition further.

Women in Journalism

Although journalism is considered as a profession of society's conscious section, women in this profession are also the victims of discrimination. Nowadays, educated and career-oriented women are plentiful in Bangladesh, but they are usually discouraged to take up journalism and

whenever they are recruited in newspapers they are asked to do desk-work, not reporting. Leading newspapers like Ittefaq and Sangbad still do not have any female reporters.

According to PIB statistics, the number of daily papers, including vernacular and English dailies, was 94 in 2001 in capital Dhaka alone. Of the newspapers, 65 were vernaculars, nine were English dailies, 108 weeklies, 35 fortnightly magazines, 85 monthlies and 80 quarterlies.

Statistics provided by DFP show that there were 397 dailies, 200 fortnightly papers, 752 weeklies, 346 monthlies, 45 quarterlies published from across the country in 2001. The figures indicate that the number of newspapers and newsmagazines is rising in the country. However, the number of newswomen is not rising at the same pace.

A survey conducted by the News Network revealed that newswomen account for only 6 percent among regular staff working in national dailies, except those working as apprentice.

In discussion with the News Network correspondent, a number of girls working in different national dailies and news agencies said they are encouraged by their authorities to work in the desk rather than joining the reporting team. If sent to reporting they are hardly allowed to cover

important events.

Maifuza Jesmine working for BSS Bangla service said: Given the present condition of our male-dominated society, girls are forced to choose deskwork in journalism. The first obstacle to sending girls to reporting comes from their own families. Many guardians are opposed to sending girls for spot coverage out of their stereotype ideas that they might face unwarranted situation. They like the profession for their girls as long as it concerns deskwork.

Differing with the idea that journalism is not for girls, Dr Arefin Siddique, a Professor at Journalism department of Dhaka University, said: It is wrong to discourage girls to take up journalism. It is also wrong to say that they cannot cover serious events. The girl who can earn appreciation in banking sector, she can fare well in journalism too. What we need is to groom them up with proper training," he said.

"It's true that girls are not appointed in reporting team and it's mainly because of transport problem. Anyway, we'll keep it in mind whenever we'll go for fresh recruitment," said Ittefaq Executive Editor Hassan Shahriar.

Another girl, Masuma Khanam, working for Sangbad, said girls are more sincere compared to their male counterparts no matter where they work. But the problem in journalism is that the policymakers rarely encourage newswomen to cover events.

"To attract increased number of girls to news media, the owners should give concessions to girls, including special quota, sensible payment and increased facilities to groom up their talents. Give them a chance and they will fare better than boys," Dr Arefin Siddique said.



Many women are joining different professions but who will provide them protection against harassment?

LAW letter



First Woman Dean of Law

Congratulations to Dr. Taslima Monsoor for being elected as the first woman Dean of Law. It is indeed encouraging for the womenfolk in the country specially the women in legal fraternity. I hope she will be able to keep the faculty of law beyond narrow political interests. The faculty should be a place of excellence for study and research.

Good Luck!
Dr. Ashfaqur Rahman
Gulshan, Dhaka



In Law & Our Rights page (February 10, 2002), you have mentioned Dr. Taslima Monsoor, is the first woman Dean in Bangladesh. This is not a fact.

Professor Khaleda Rashid, a BUET Architecture graduate of 1974, having later completed her MURP from the University of Hawaii, was Dean of the Faculty of Architecture & Planning, BUET from 3 January 1999 till 11 January 2001.

Dr. Nizamuddin Ahmed
Professor and Dean
Dean of the Faculty of Architecture & Planning
BUET

The Law Page item "First Woman Dean in Bangladesh" (January 10) is not correct. Possibly a Professor of Agricultural University was elected the First Woman Dean in Bangladesh in late '80s. The Second Woman Dean of Bangladesh is Professor Khanom Momtaz Ahmed of Rajshahi University. She was elected Dean of the Arts Faculty of Rajshahi University in 2001. She is the first woman Senate member of Rajshahi University.

Md. Khorseduzzaman
Lecturer, Department of Law
University of Rajshahi

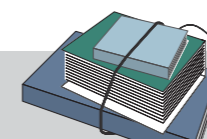
Being one of the ex-students of Faculty of Law, University of Dhaka, and also being a female student, I was very proud at Taslima Monsoor's (our Taslima Apa) achievement as the first female Dean of Law. The 'Law and Our Rights' claimed her to be the first woman Dean in Bangladesh and I have heard a number of repercussions on that, each contradicting the other. May be she is not the first woman Dean in Bangladesh but she definitely is the first woman Dean of Law in Bangladesh. Hence hats off to our Taslima Apa and all the best.

Rubana Sharmin.
on e-mail.

Law and Our Rights Page (10 February 2002) had a news item on the 'First Woman Dean in Bangladesh'. It has been reported that Dr Taslima Monsoor has become the first woman Dean in Faculty of Law of University of Dhaka. It was really heartening to know, that in Bangladesh where the women folks are said to be sitting in the back bench, of the society, one of them is not only educating oneself but also reaching to a position, where she will be leading the Faculty of Law of the highest educational institution of Bangladesh.

Khaled Abid.
Windsor, Canada.

REVIEWING the views



Conservation of Biological diversity in Bangladesh

SYEDA AFROZA ZERIN

CONSERVATION of Bio-diversity is gradually becoming a major concern of international community as nowadays the extinction of various species is increasingly becoming a common scene throughout the world. Like many other country Bangladesh too has been facing this problem.

Bangladesh has a rich variety of wild life and bio-diversity, which are contributing to our economic development and ecological stability. The term "biological diversity" has been described in the Bio-diversity Convention 1992 as the "variability among living organisms from all sources including, inter alia, terrestrial, marine, and aquatic ecosystems and the ecological complexes of which they are part: this includes diversity at the genes level." Bangladesh has ratified this Convention.

But due to our negligence, deforestation, conversion of wetlands for agriculture and unplanned development activities the diversity in genes, species and ecosystem in the biosphere of our country is disappearing fast which is going to cause a serious consequences for our environment.

Once upon a time most of the Bangladesh's forest had a rich variety of flora and fauna. But due to the great deal of deforestation, many wildlife species have been exterminated in Bangladesh and many more are threatened with extermination.

Towards the end of 1997 the international communities has declared an area in Sunderban as a World Heritage Site. No way to deny that lots of project has been taken and many more projects are in the pipeline for the Sunderban. Moreover, Bangladesh has enacted various laws and adopted different environmental policies. Specially to ensure the conservation of biological diversity Bangladesh has ratified and signed various international conventions, declarations and treaties relating environmental protection. Despite taking all these steps the forest cover has shrunk to merely six percent today from 20 percent in 1927. The last century has seen the extinction of six mammal species including the Javan Rhino, the Swamp Deer indigenous to the Sunderban, and over forty six wildlife species have been listed as endangered. Furthermore, forty species of animals are threatened with extinction.

It is not more than twenty or twenty five years ago wild cats (jungle cats) were available not only in the woodlands but also in the in situ. Now due to the over population and infrastructure development these species have been exterminated.

Once upon a time Bangladesh was unique for its various species of birds of which 40 species are threatened and 50 other species are nearly threatened. The most endangered species of birds are white winged duck, camb duck, stork, crane, pheasant and partridge. Just before twenty years 300 species of migratory birds would have been taken shelter in Bangladesh as Bangladesh is one of the major wintering ground for the migratory birds. But today this number has been reduced to 50. Conversion of wetlands for agriculture is one of the main reasons behind reduction of the number of various migratory birds. Because most of the migratory birds take shelter in

different wetlands of Bangladesh e.g. Chalanbil, Char Khidirpur, Char Osman, Neel shagor and the coastal area of Sunderban. It must be noted here that. Bangladesh's wetlands are reported to have reduced to half its size.

Not only that, birds fish resources of Bangladesh is also depleting for the same reason. It has been reported that fisheries catch has dropped by an average of 9 percent every year over the past decade. Therefore Dr. M. Youssouf Ali, former Secretary of the Department of Fisheries writes that if the present trend continues, in 50 to 100 years there may be no open-water fisheries production at all.

Bangladesh has a rich variety of floral species also. Once upon a time most of the Bangladesh's forest had a rich variety of floras but now a day due to the deforestation, over harvesting, grazing, illegal felling, uncontrolled and wasteful commercial exploitation floral species are depleting. Bangladesh has 4500 floral species out of which 80 species are endangered and 100 species are threatened. From a news report it is found that over-harvesting and top dying has caused a staggering 76% decline in the number of sunderi trees.

True that until recently, neither the Government nor the citizen of our country was conscious about their right and duty to the environment. But now the perspective is completely changed. Not only the Government but also the people have definitely become more conscious of their environment.

Bangladesh has already enacted a number of laws relating to environment for the conservation of biological diversity e.g. Bangladesh Environment Conservation Act 1995, and adopted some policies as well like Environmental Policy, 1992; Environmental Action Plan, 1992 etc. The citizen has already showed their awareness by protesting the decision of the government to encroach part of the Osmani Uddayan and by making a very positive response to the order of the government to stop using polythene.

However, considering the present situation it could be said that undoubtedly it is high time to take some effective steps for the conservation of the biological diversity of our country. For example, our agricultural practices are not eco-friendly. Therefore, we have to look for an eco-friendly agricultural system. More than 80% people of our country depend directly or indirectly for their livelihood on the bio-resources. We have to ensure the sustainable use of these bio-resources. Destruction of natural resources of Bangladesh is further intensified by the development activities. In our country, we see that Industries or Hospitals are being erected before taking any steps to handle the waste. Moreover, we know that there are potential risks to the environment from improper handling waste. These wastage mix with the water of river and lakes. Consequently we lose various wetland species. Hence, development activities should be sustainable in nature and eco-friendly as well. Last but not the least the existing laws should be enforced properly. Otherwise, it will be really impossible for the future generation to lead a healthy life in this country.

Syeda Afroza Zerini is an advocat

LAW lexicon



Building social resistance against dowry

ABUL HASNAT

Dowry is perhaps the greatest force contributing to the oppression of women in India and elsewhere in South Asia. Originally intended as a way to provide for daughters in a culture where women are not entitled to family inheritances, the tradition has evolved into an insidious practice of bankrupting families and abusing women. "Dowry is a form of theft legitimized by marriage," said M.J. Akbar, a prominent Indian newspaper editor. "It's economic bondage. And when the woman stops being frightened by torture, the only option is to burn her." While law enforcement authorities said the increase partly reflects a greater willingness by women's families to report the deaths, they also said the statistics represent only a fraction of the actual cases believed to have been committed. They also do not include the tens of thousands of incidents of non-fatal dowry harassment and physical and mental abuse inflicted on wives by husbands and in-laws.

From the time of a daughter's birth, parents know their family will face years sometimes generations of debt to pay for her wedding and dowry, prompting the widespread practice of killing baby girls and aborting female fetuses. If the daughter is allowed to live, the parents believing they are only caretakers for the girl, who will eventually be given to her husband's family consider her a burden and often give her less food, medical care and attention than her brothers. Then bridegrooms' families believe they are entitled to hefty payments for accepting the burden of a woman. It is aptly clear that legal regime cannot eradicate this vice; there is dearth of more pro-active and vigorous social campaign and mobilisation. Initiatives have to be taken to involve more and more younger people at every stage of anti-dowry social movement. Breaking the cycle of dowry will remain a critical, challenge for everyone in India and South Asia.

Human rights challenge to speed cameras

The owner of a classic car which has appeared in a number of television series is to take his case against roadside speed cameras to the European Court. Idris Francis, a retired company director, was prosecuted under the Road Traffic Act for refusing to tell police who was behind the wheel when his 1938 Alvis Speed 25 was clocked doing 47mph in a 30mph zone.

He successfully pleaded to Guildford magistrates that to do so could be a breach of the Human Rights Act that protects him from incriminating himself. They have adjourned the case so he can make an application to a judge in Strasbourg for it to be heard there.

The Association of British Drivers has set up a fund for the landmark battle and Mr Francis's defence team will be led by Michael Shrimpton, who also defended Steve Thoburn, the "Metric Martyr". The classic car enthusiast also plans to drive his vintage motor to Europe for the case.

Mr Francis of West Meon, near Petersfield in Hampshire, whose car has appeared in the Ruth Rendell television series and The Charnier, said that he was willing to foot the £20,000 legal bill himself, but was encouraging other drivers to join the campaign. "My car was caught on a speed camera, but these cameras do not identify the driver," he said. "If the case is successful, the UK Government may have to withdraw all prosecutions against other drivers caught by a speed camera."