

## COVER STORY

about gender rights and healthy relations, the role of the family and freedom of opinion of women. It is also important for men to participate in the process because, be it the legal system or the media, lawmakers or the private sector, it is all controlled by men, and if any changes are to be made, they need to be included in the process, Rahman pointed out.

Another important aspect we need to focus on, said Dr. Firdous Azim of Naripokkho, is the process of justice. Getting the harshest punishment in any single case is not what is important. The whole process of justice must be responsive and transparent, she said, making it easier for women who are victims to get justice, from reporting it to the police, to getting proper treatment at the hospital and fair judgement in court. The media also has a role to play, said Azim. Instead of sensationalising only a few cases, as many as possible should be publicised and followed up by a sensitised media.

Also necessary are proper coping mechanisms, she said. It is not only after a crime occurs that we should react to them. In order to prevent them, we need to campaign throughout. The anti-acid campaign has been one such example, where movements by various groups and organisations has served to increase awareness of the crime.

Finally what is needed is a clarification of concepts as well as laws. What is domestic violence? What is marital rape? Is it a crime? What about sex workers? What rights do they have? Why should a rape victim be made to marry her violator and accept him as the legal father of her child, if any? Most people don't even know that compromising in criminal cases is illegal. Only when we know what is what will we know whether they are right or wrong, whether they are crimes to be reported or not and whether there is any hope of getting justice.

The reasons behind violence against women are manifold and multi-dimensional and each one must be addressed in order for the remedies to be effective. But it is only when a woman knows her rights -- the right to decision-making in the family, the right of a married woman to visit her parents, the right not to be beaten, the right not to be forced into having sex, even with her husband -- when she knows what she is entitled to, will a woman know what to fight for and what to fight against. For this, women need to be educated -- and so do men. In the fight for the exercise of her rights, the support of the family, society and the legal system is essential.

The ultimate duty to protect women and their rights, as Dr. Shahnaz Huda pointed out, lies with the State. The initiative of bringing about change through educating people, passing laws and enforcing them, and giving exemplary punishment must come from the government. Something, that, right now, seems like a far cry.

## The Deafening Silence

SRABONTI NARMEEN ALI

**T**HERE are some things that many people take for granted -- the right to exist peacefully in a country where they belong, the right to walk on the street without being subjected to ridicule and harassment, the right to identify themselves with a certain religion or culture, the right to expect the support of family and friends. Article One of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights states that "All human beings are born free and are equal in dignity and rights. They are endowed with reason and conscience and should act towards one another in a spirit of brotherhood".

It is unfortunate, however, that of all the social problems that Bangladesh faces, one of the most salient is regarding the rights of marginalised people.

Prashanta Tripura, Regional Coordinator of the Chittagong Hill Tracts Programme of CARE Bangladesh and Dr. Nazneen Akhter, Executive Director of HIV/AIDS and STD Alliance of Bangladesh (HASAB) are fighting for the rights of different target groups but their ideology is



The ethnicity of indigenous people is still not constitutionally recognised.