

COVER STORY

their rights in reality. Things will not change unless we start working from the heart. The establishment of child rights must become a nationwide campaign.

U. M. Habibunnesa, Programme Head, Justice and Violence, Save the Children UK, discussed juvenile justice, another topic in the 'rights' arena. Why does one have to resort to the highest court to protest and say that the child has rights too? The penalty connected with juvenile crimes should not be confused with the punishment meted out to criminals.

Children in our society are under attack in two different ways. They are either the victims or the perpetrators. So they are either suffering from being exposed to violence, acid attack and rape or are themselves committing such crimes. When we hear about these children who carry arms or do drugs, we skulk away. Even the parents of these children leave them to the *rashtra* (State) to deal with as they have gone astray. "We need to take responsibility for them. After all, they are our children," asserted Habibunnesa.

Habibunnesa also brought up the sticky issue of safe custody. What is our definition of safe custody? When a young girl has been raped and her assailants threaten to kill her she is asked to expose the criminals. But what security can we offer her? We claim that we are offering her 'safety' by sending her to safe-custody or police custody to a 'safe home'. There are about seven such places in Bangladesh under the title of Safe Homes. In these homes, there are about 217 girls, all below 16. Though these girls are victims and not criminals, they are put in an environment which curtails their freedom. "These girls hardly have the chance to see sunlight, as they are incarcerated within the walls. They cannot even talk to anyone if they wish. Their freedom is the first casualty," added Habibunnesa.

Bangladesh being a poor country has made certain laws regarding the work that the children do because it is a necessity for their survival. But when they do something wrong, they are put in confinement, no

special treatment has ever been thought of regarding juvenile delinquency.

Around 4000 children have been arrested all over Bangladesh in the year 2004. Of them different NGOs have managed to release 1954 children so far. "The situation is that, the government arrests these children and NGOs try to get them out of jail. It has become a game," said Habibunnesa. "The more serious issues underlying the crime are ignored. It is like an iceberg where only the tip is visible and we react to that. We need to address the submerged mass. Why are these children committing such offences?" she continued.

Dr. Naila Khan, Head of Shishu Bikash Kendra, Bangladesh Shishu Hospital, emphasised on health issues of the children. When our health system is concerned, 'our health ministry is outsourcing everything.' They are not calling the different NGOs or social organisations to meetings to discuss what can be done. They are going at their own pace.

Another alarming issue is the increasing death rate at childbirth. During childbirth an injection called fedipheron is administered to quicken the labour period. This drug is now being administered to all mothers in labour in most rural



While in the clutch of poverty, the issues of rights remain a far cry for most Bangladeshi children

areas. Some of the mothers cannot even pronounce the name of the drug, but they are taking them to have easy labour. As a result, the new-born has complications after birth. "This may be a reason why people in our country are becoming so stunted, while in most other countries people are getting taller," said Dr. Naila. Some of these babies also become mentally retarded. "About 80-90 percent children in Bangladesh know nothing about sex education," she continued. This is the highest rate of illiteracy in any country.