

INTERNATIONAL WOMEN'S DAY

Jahanara tackles *monga* through her vegetable garden

Jahanara works in her garden a few hours daily, and her husband, children and a granddaughter help her in selling the vegetables in the market. "Family feuds occurred regularly when we were living in want of food and money, but now our family is very peaceful as there is no food crisis due to the increased income from the garden and poultry raising," said Jahanara.

PARVEZ BABUL AND REJWANUL KARIM ANIK

Tista nodir pare... bazar dotara nodir pare bosi moishalre... (A river-song of Bangladesh)

It was a sunny day of Falgun last week. I reached the village Garnaipar of Gongachora upazilla in Rangpur District, which is besides the double-dealing river Tista. My assignment was to observe how Jahanara Begum (36) tackled *Monga* last year through homestead food production. It was amazing to learn that she overcame the food crisis successfully without collecting any relief. Not only that, she bought 22 decimal of land and extended her vegetable garden to that plot.

A portion of the money came from the income of surplus produce. Now, Jahanara is the role model of her community and a successful example of women's empowerment.

Gongachora is a *Monga*-prone area. Jahanara was a victim of that and she used to live in poverty. She had three children and had to live from hand to mouth, and even sometimes half-fed. Flood and river erosion made them penniless and indebted.

It was then that Jahanara got motivation on homestead food production, training for improved agricultural practices, inputs vegetables seeds and poultry, and tech-

nical assistance from Helen Keller International (HKI).

As HKI's founder Helen Keller said: "When one door of happiness closes, another opens; but often we look so long at the closed door that we do not see the one which has been opened for us." This was reflected in the life of Jahanara and her family in real sense after she started her homestead gardening.

There were about 25 varieties of vegetables at her garden. Jahanara works in her garden a few hours daily, and her husband, children and a granddaughter help her in selling the vegetables in the market. "Family feuds occurred regularly when we were living in want of food and money, but now our family is very peaceful as there is no food crisis due to the increased income from the garden and poultry raising," said Jahanara. "Even my husband is more supportive to me and we jointly decide for the well-being of our family. So the poor women of our country like me should be included in this type of helpful program," she added.

Jahanara's husband Azizul said: "My wife is my asset. I have seen the face of happiness because of her hard labour in homestead gardening. Now we eat more nutritious food which we could not afford in the past," he added.

In a recent visit to Gongachora,

Rangpur, Chief Adviser Dr. Fakhruddin Ahmed also laid special emphasis on the cultivation of diversified crops, undertaking income-generating projects to offset the *Monga*.

Life in the chars in Bangladesh

A bulletin of the Nutrition Surveillance Project (NSP) of Helen Keller International and Institute of Public Health Nutrition (IPHN) states that over five million people live in char areas in Bangladesh.

These are highly vulnerable to sudden and forceful flooding as well as erosion. Living in the chars is both hazardous and insecure. Many char dwellers struggle to produce or buy enough food to eat. Malnutrition and micronutrient deficiencies are more common in chars than elsewhere in the country.

Solutions to these problems require approaches that help poor households make best use of their available resources and cope better with the difficult environment.

Helen Keller International's homestead food production program provides support to fragile livelihoods in the chars. It improves the well-being of the entire household by promoting specially adapted low cost technologies for gardening and livestock-raising. It also improves food security and

dietary practices, and creates employment opportunities for women and a source of income for the household.

NSP data show that char households are about 13 times more likely to have been affected by disasters than households in rural Bangladesh. The prevalence of maternal night blindness, an early sign of vitamin A deficiency, in the chars was more than double than the prevalence in rural Bangladesh.

There are limited opportunities for employment in char areas. That is why, for the sake of the best utilisation of the available resources, the vulnerable char dwellers need support from both the government and non-government organisations (NGOs), especially in the areas of technical training, agricultural supplies and market access.

Malnutrition and homestead food production in Bangladesh

Home gardening is an ancient method of food production that is commonly practiced throughout the world. Growing vegetables in the homestead is a traditional practice in Bangladesh and has the potential to reduce the prevalence of micronutrient deficiency among children and women.

Integrating poultry production with home gardening managed by females enhances production and consumption of nutritious foods, generates income, and empowers women in decision-making.

At Gongachora, like in other char areas of Bangladesh, Helen Keller International in collaboration with Debi Chowdhurani Palli Unnayan Kendra (DCPUK) has been imple-

menting the homestead food production program that integrates animal husbandry with home gardening.

The program aims to improve household food security and livelihood by increasing production and consumption of plant and animal foods. "Such a program should expand to at least two more upazillas; Kaunia and Pirgachha to reach many vulnerable households," Md. Nurul Islam Dulu, Executive Director of DCPUK said. "The poor and hardcore poor people are badly affected by *Monga* in those upazillas also," Dulu added.

Homestead food production and nutrition programs also contribute to improved food security, better social and gender equity, poverty reduction, established support services systems, and micro-enterprise development.

Micronutrient malnutrition affects more than 20 million children and women in Bangladesh. The diets of more than 85 percent of women and children in Bangladesh are inadequate in essential micronutrients such as vitamin A.

Since 1990, Helen Keller International Bangladesh has been implementing food based interventions to provide micronutrient-rich food at the household and community level. Nutrition education and women empowerment are key components to achieve increased utilisation and integration of key food production and marketing practices.

The neighbouring households also benefit from the program. Within about two decades the homestead food production program (HFPP) has reached over five million beneficiaries in Bangladesh.



Jahanara works at her homestead garden daily.

Women's participation in homestead food production

Women in rural Bangladesh have traditionally managed homestead gardening, from sowing to harvesting, and storing of seed. The involvement of women in this program creates new employment opportunities for underprivileged women.

In addition, women are generally the nutrition gatekeepers, i.e., the principal decision makers in producing and preparing food for their children. So, if women are trained there is a greater likelihood that the vegetables will be consumed, particularly by children.

On average, women represent 70 per cent of the targeted households.

It may be noted here that gender equality and the improvement of children's nutritional status are related, and mentioned in the first and third Millennium Development Goals (MDGs).

A study of Helen Keller International conducted by the NSP recommended interventions to improve living conditions in the chars, helping the char dwellers make best use of their available resources. Homestead food production programs should be included in strategies to improve household food security, nutrition and livelihoods in the chars.

Programs like homestead food production offer greater opportu-

nity for women to be involved in the income generating activity as well as in the decision making process at the family level. "Providing women opportunity for self-development such as the homestead food production program of Helen Keller International, embraces the ideology -- you build a woman you build a nation. Helen Keller International is proud of its contribution to women empowerment through its programs," Ms Chantell Witten, Country Director of Helen Keller International Bangladesh, said.

Parvez Babul is the Information and Advocacy Officer and Rejwanul Karim Anik is the Program Manager, HFPP of Helen Keller International, Bangladesh.

Action against acid attack and dowry

Life is precious by all means. But in a country like Bangladesh, and when acid throwing and setting fire to women have become common, I strongly recommend that capital punishment be the only punishment for such crimes.

TAYEB HUSAIN

YESTERDAY, March 2nd, I read a pathetic story in Daily Star of an 18 years old girl. Her name is Nila and she is a victim of an acid attack, and the criminal is her husband.

Nila was married to one Akbar Hossain, an ex-patriate from Saudi Arabia. He did not demand any dowry and there was no quarrel for which Akbar, the horrendous monster, attacked Nila with acid in the middle of the night. What Nila recalls is that the fiend was angry at her because she wanted to visit her parents. He was very upset for such a trifle matter. Nila tried to settle the issue but the cruel beast did not calm down.

After dinner, he went to the market and bought some acid. At

midnight, when Nila woke up, she saw him sitting on a chair with his eyes bloodshot out of anger. When she asked him what had happened, the brute just walked up to her with a glassful of acid and poured it over her head. The action was quick and the result was total destruction of Nila's face with deep burns. Nila is now under treatment in a hospital. Her normal life, for sure, is fully obliterated if she survives. My heart bleeds at the tragedy that occurred due to deliberate act by a criminal husband.

Today, March 3rd, I read another sad story in the Daily Star, about a 22 years old housewife, with a 3 year old, child who died at Dhaka Medical College hospital on February 22. Her name is Rupa Begum and she died after her husband and in-laws allegedly set her on fire as

her family refused to give dowry. Rupa was married in 2003 to one Manik Bepari, and her family gave Tk 50,000, gold ornaments and furniture worth Tk One lakh as dowry. After six months, Manik and his family demanded Tk One lakh again for sending Manik to Saudi Arabia. They often tortured Rupa to get the demand fulfilled, and on February 22, after an argument, Manik and his family members set her on fire; ninety percent of her body was burnt and she died after 10 days.

These sorts of news reports from Bangladesh are the worst sorts of criminal stories one can read about in the Bangladeshi media. What has gone wrong with the people there? How on earth can one be so cruel and inhuman to a fellow human being? We know life is tough and poverty is

rampant but Bangladesh was never such a land of criminals as it is today than it was, say 35 years ago, even though economically the country is much better off than it ever has been. Corruption and criminality seem to be the way of life in Bangladesh. Can something be done about it? Let Bangladesh government and the civil society ponder for a while, and let them do something to cure, at least, the two above mentioned diseases.

Acid throwing and setting fire to women are crimes that need immediate action, and it cannot and should not wait one more day. These sorts of crimes are horrendous, and equally merciless action must be taken against those who commit such crimes. I am against all sorts of capital punishment; it is against human

dignity and no doubt it becomes a crime against a crime. Nobody has the right to take someone's life, for whatever reason it may be. Any action by which someone, even a criminal, is killed by firing squad or by hanging is no good. Life is precious by all means. But in a country like Bangladesh, and when acid throwing and setting fire to women have become common, I strongly recommend that capital punishment be the only punishment for such crimes.

Action against dowry is also over-due. Girls from Bangladesh's Hindu community were the victims of this crime for centuries. Now it has become a norm even among the Muslims. There should be laws, if there are no such laws as yet in Bangladesh, that forbid acid throwing, setting fire and dowry taking. These offences should be punished properly, specially the first two crimes. Acid throwers and woman burners, without a second thought, should be exe-

cuted by firing squad or by hanging. I suggest that the caretaker government evoke this type of law immediately, and use it mercilessly against acid throwers or woman burners. I beg the readers for forgiveness for suggesting such a law, but considering the graveness of the crimes I go even further to say that such a criminal may be executed publicly in the city square. Horrendous crimes need to be tackled by equally ruthless means.

Dowry is a criminal act, and it shows utmost dishonour to women. Anybody who claims dowry should be considered a criminal, and such a criminal should be punished. Huge fines, and even 3-5 years jail sentences may be introduced as punishment for anybody who demands dowry or agrees to paid dowry. It is time that Bangladesh learns to respect and protect her woman folk.

Tayeb Husain writes from Sweden.

Vittachi
ONLY IN ASIA
by Nury Vittachi

This joke is going to kill you

WARNING: DO NOT LAUGH at this column. Readers who do so are acting entirely at their own risk and we assume no responsibility for injuries caused by the reading thereof.

An alert reader informs me that contrary to what was stated in yesterday's column, laughter is not necessarily good for your health, but can be lethal. "In 1975, a 50-year-old man called Alex Mitchell laughed himself to death watching a TV comedy called The Goodies," she wrote. "His wife Nessie wrote to the actors thanking them for making her husband's last moments so happy."

I was intrigued. Thinking about this in a taxi on the way to see a comedian friend, I was reminded of The Funniest Joke in the World, a 1969 Monty Python sketch.

This went as follows: During World War 2, a British comedy writer laughed himself to death after composing a joke so funny that anyone who heard it died laughing. So the British army decided to use it against the Nazis. It was so powerful that each word had to be translated by a different translator. (One translator who accidentally glimpsed a second word was hospitalised for weeks.) At the height of fighting in 1944, monolingual British soldiers leapt on to the battlefield and read the German translation of the joke, causing their enemies to drop dead on the spot.

Could this have been based on fact? It occurred to me that idioms about humour all have violent connotations: "He laughed till his stomach hurt," "She split her sides." And the horrific "They laughed their heads off."

phoned a doctor. Can a person die laughing?

"Oh yes," she replied. "Laughing raises the heart rate and causes the body to go into a convulsive state which can trigger a heart attack. Ideally, you should pitch your jokes to raise your readers' heart rates to no more than 85 per cent of maximum."

"Can a man actually laugh his head off?" I asked.

"Not at your column," she said, ringing off.

I dialed the number of a friendly lawyer. "Should humorists take out limited liability coverage? What if a reader actually does split his sides?"

I'm sure I could hear him scratching his wallet as he pondered. "It would be cheaper to add a disclaimer to the top of your column," he advised.

I finally reached the café where I was lunching with the comedian. He told me this was an issue only in the west. "Westerners laugh more easily, and take out lawsuits more easily," he said. "Asians, and especially Asian men, don't like to show their feelings."

This solved a mystery that has puzzled me for months. Last year, I did a comic routine in front of an all-male audience of East Asians. They sat in stony silence. No one laughed. But afterwards, they raced up to me, slapped my back, told me they'd never heard anything funnier and made me promise to make a return visit.

They must have been concentrating on keeping their heart rates at 85 per cent of maximum.

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Equality between women and men

Why it matters and how it can be done

The last five years has seen a dramatic rise in the numbers of women in the workforce, particularly in urban areas in the export processing industries, notably the ready made garment (RMG) sector. The work of these women has brought in much needed foreign exchange for the country and has contributed to well-being of millions of poor families in villages and towns across the country. But it is not only in the garment sector that women are increasingly contributing to both their own household economy and the national economy. Currently one in ten of all entrepreneurs in Bangladesh is a woman. While this is low compared to advanced economies, where one in four entrepreneurs is a woman, it signals a welcome change from the past.

CHRIS AUSTIN

BANGLADESH has made good progress towards equality between women and men. But more needs to be done to ensure that women have equal rights and opportunities. Today, there are thousands of events taking place around the world to inspire those who work for women's equality. As we embrace the spirit of International Women's Day, I'd like to highlight why equality matters and what is being done to achieve it in Bangladesh.

The last twenty years have seen considerable changes in gender relations in Bangladesh. These have been part of a wider social and economic development process. While poverty rates have reduced overall, poverty in Bangladesh continues to affect women more acutely than men.

Women get less pay than men and face difficulties in owning their own property or land. This is reflected in health and social indicators that are frankly appalling. Bangladesh's maternal mortality rate is still one of the highest in the world: every year 320 women for every 100,000 die in childbirth. This means that in Bangladesh a woman dies from childbirth every hour of every day. Baby girls are more likely to die in their first year than boys. Girls in Bangladesh are five times more likely to drop out of school in grade one than boys, and one out of every two women in Bangladesh is illiterate. These inequalities of opportunity are reflected in the fact that one in every five households headed by women in Bangladesh earns less than Tk 28 per person per day.

At the same time, violence against women is increasingly

understood as a serious and growing problem. A recent study found that around 53 per cent of women in Dhaka reported at least one incidence of physical or sexual violence in their lifetime. These are Bangladesh's mothers, sisters, wives and daughters, and frankly this is unacceptable.

The UNDP's Human Development Report (2006) puts Bangladesh 137th among 177 countries in its Gender Development Index; and 67th of 75 countries in the Gender Empowerment Measure. It comes as no surprise that Bangladesh's Poverty Reduction Strategy states that, "among all the inequalities in Bangladesh, discrimination against women reflects the most blatant form of injustice".

So what can be done about it? Practical, genuine rights for women really matter to both Bangladesh and the UK, and we

are working together to achieve both women's empowerment and equality between men and women.

Bangladesh should be proud of what it has achieved so far. For example, in 1990 a third of all girls and a quarter of all boys did not go to primary school. By 2005, roughly equal numbers of boys and girls were enrolling in primary school. While the numbers of women dying in childbirth is unacceptably high, the last 15 years have seen a substantial 22 per cent reduction in maternal mortality.

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and has contributed to well-being of millions of poor families in villages and towns across the country. But it is not only in the garment sector that women are increasingly contributing to both their own household economy and the national economy. Currently one in ten of all entrepreneurs in Bangladesh is a woman. While this is low compared to advanced economies, where one in four entrepreneurs is a woman, it signals a welcome change from the past.

We are proud that the UK has contributed to some of these achievements. In the health and primary education sector, DFID is the biggest bi-lateral donor. DFID has committed £250 million over the next 5-7 years to programmes that will lift 6 million people out of extreme poverty. This means having more than Tk 22 a day to live on. Around 90 per cent of those programmes' direct beneficiaries are women. Working with BRAC, for example, we will help lift 800,000 women out of extreme poverty which will result in approximately 4 million people emerging out of extreme poverty.

DFID is working with other donors and the Government of Bangladesh to increase aware-

ness of gender violence. And we are working closely with the government to ensure that legislation supports women's empowerment. We have lent our weight to the government's desire to make Bangladesh a better, safer place for women. We have done that by supporting a media and publicity campaign that brings these issues to the public's attention, and galvanises support to combat the many forms of violence against women.

We are also working with the police to make Bangladesh a safer place for women. We have helped to increase police awareness of gender issues and to improve the way they respond to vulnerable groups, including women and girls. And we've worked to establish police and victim support groups, referral systems in police stations for women and girls, and one-stop crisis centres.

Though major challenges remain, a lot has been achieved and there are exciting opportunities to create and promote change. We stand ready to work with Bangladesh's government and people to support women's empowerment and equality.

Chris Austin is the Country Representative, DFID Bangladesh.