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## INTERNATIONAL WOMAN'S DAY 2008

INVESTING IN WOMAN AND GIRLS

The Daily Star

### FOR YOUR information

# Investment in women and girls is women's empowerment

BARRISTER HARUN UR RASHID

**W**OMEN are grossly discriminated against men in male-dominated society. They are discriminated in every sphere of public and private life by men. In developed countries, women also suffer from unequal wage and there is a "glass-ceiling" in corporate bodies that does not ordinarily allow women to become either executive directors or chief executive officers. Empowerment of women and girls is a long lasting investment for economic and social development in developing countries. Empowerment of women will create among them innovation, creativity and improvisation. Grameen Bank has demonstrated that women micro-credit receivers are financially more responsible than men-folk in paying their dues and getting more returns from the micro-credit. How do you empower or invest in women? Many development practitioners have come up with five objectives of empowerment: (a) anti-poverty approach, (b) welfare approach, (c) equity approach, (d) efficiency approach and (e) empowerment approach. Let me discuss the empowerment approach.

#### Empowerment of or investment in women

Education is an essential element of the investment of girls and women. A good quality education, designed on the basis of women and girls' immediate and strategic needs, builds women's capacities and prepares them to seize opportunities in the public and private domains. By investing in women and girls, women are empowered that is crucial to change some of the societal attitudes and behaviours that discriminate against girls and women. The investment in women and girls is therefore directly linked to their empowerment and to the full enjoyment of their rights in society. Women represent over 50 percent of the world's population and provide 60-80 percent of the world's agricultural labor, yet some research indicates they own less than 5 percent of the world's land. Assets and income in the hands of women results in higher caloric intake and better nutrition for the household than when in the hands of men. Improving women's land rights makes a powerful contribution to household food



Platform for Action (1995), significant achievements have been made in empowering women in the region. Their economic participation has shown uneven but steady progress with gender differentials in wages falling in many instances. Significant progress has also been made in terms of increases in female literacy and life expectancy rates, and reduction in mortality rates. A growing number of women are also succeeding in the use of new and innovative technologies, especially information technologies, and empowering themselves through effective participation in national machineries and non-governmental organizations (NGOs). For example Grameen bank, Brac and other micro-financial institutions have empowered women in the country side of Bangladesh and they are no more solely dependent on income of husbands or male members of the family. With the changing demographic structure of the region and increase in the proportion of older persons, especially older women, the need for appropriate policies and systems to provide economic and social support will be an important issue. Promoting the greater participation of women in decision-making will continue to be a formidable challenge. The task of social and economic empowerment of women therefore remains a priority area of concern for the countries of the region.

#### Challenges

There are also formidable challenges for women. Women are still grossly under-represented in the decision-making process and have restricted access to productive resources and social support systems. They experience the major brunt of the economic crisis and the modern adjustment process in the form of increased unemployment. Poverty remains the single most debilitating factor, hampering the integration of women into the development process. In many countries, the number of women in poverty continues to grow, with renewed fear that if there is any economic crisis in the country, it is likely to push a large number of women into poverty and social despair. They fall back on the informal sector for economic survival. Although significant progress has been made in alleviating poverty in the region, the women in poverty continue to suffer from economic hardship and social exclusion.

The progress so far achieved in empowering or investing in women is highly uneven, with the weaker economies, especially the least developed countries and the economies in transition, falling significantly behind. The present economic globalisation has exposed women to greater uncertainty. Trafficking in women and children, with all its attendant social ills, and violence against women, has remained a major cause for concern in the SAARC region. The problems of economic and social support for ageing populations, especially older women, loom as an emerging challenge. An increasing number of women are being trafficked for sexual exploitation and forced labour, with growing incidents of violence against women. Many migrant women face the bleak prospects of unemployment when they return home.

#### SAARC's role

SAARC (South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation) has been engaged with the issue of gender-equality and to bring women in the mainstream development. During 1990s a regional plan was adopted identifying areas of concern and goals for women. Several short-term activities like workshops, training courses were held in the areas of women and environment, women and education, women and employment and women in agriculture.

#### Conclusion

Often it is found that although women earn money, empowerment eludes them because men take all the decisions in the family in the male-dominated traditional society. The main difficulty for empowerment of women is the hostile attitude of the conservative society to women in developing countries. They want women to continue their traditional duties of house-work and raising children. It appears that the conservative section of society does not realise that linkage between economic growth and social development is imperative for nations to prosper. Planning of gender equality and investment in women and girls appear to be the domain of politics and it is up to political leaders to ensure that right investment in women and girls takes place in society.

Barrister Harun ur Rashid is a former Bangladesh Ambassador to the UN, Geneva.

### RIGHTS corner

#### Investing in women and girls

"At the 2005 World Summit, Governments of all nations agreed that 'progress for women is progress for all'. Yet the 10-year review of the implementation of the Beijing Platform for Action revealed a serious gap between policy and practice in many countries. A lack of political will is reflected in the most telling way of all: lack of resources and insufficient budgetary allocations. That is why the theme of this International Women's Day is 'Investing in Women and Girls'". Secretary General, Ban Ki-moon

#### DO OR DIE

## Learn to speak now or forever hold your peace

MARIANNE MOLLMANN

**I** am a failure. Not because of an early divorce, or a failure to learn Chinese. Not even because, after 15 years abroad, I sometimes sound like a foreigner when speaking my native Danish language. All of those things, while potentially uncomfortable or painful, are the consequences of choices I have made. I am a failure because I have not been able to create equality in my own relationship -- despite being defined by my business card as a "women's rights advocate."

There are excuses. Equality takes time. There are social pressures involved. I have done better than my mother, even though she tried. I can't blame it all on my co-parent. He is not opposed to sharing the reproductive work -- we just can't seem to get the logistics right; what with two working adults and a child to rear in the urban jungle of cut-throat "equality" that is New York. So I'm a qualified failure -- I fail at equality in part because equality is failing me. These excuses do not get rid of the frustration. But coming out as a failure allows me to deal with whatever obstacles to equality depend solely on me. This is why I recommend the same honesty for the United Nations.

The United Nations was created in 1945 with a stated objective to put into practice the shared principle that men and women are absolute equals. Since then, only three women have been elected President of the UN General Assembly, and none have served as Secretary-General. The organization has established agencies and offices for dealing with sex-based discrimination, but has provided them with grossly inadequate funding and virtually no political influence. In other words: the United Nations sees itself as a women's rights advocate, yet like me, it has failed to create equality at home. The excuses are the same: time, social pressure, gradual improvements. But the real issue is that the organization must own up to its failure on women's rights. It is time to change.

This impetus for truth-telling, self-flagellation, and change in the area of gender equality is probably the least publicized part of the ongoing UN reform process. Yet it is also the one that has the potential of affecting the most people -- a little over half the world's population -- and it might already be under way. Next week governments from all over the world meet at the UN Commission on the Status of Women to discuss how to finance most effectively for equality.

The conclusions of this event could signal a new start for the United Nations in the area of women's rights. The laundry list of concerns is endless, but here are my top three personal recommendations:

- **Power to act.** It's not enough to say you want equality -- you need the power to do something about it. The United Nations has an abysmal record on this: of the 1,300 UN positions that state gender concern as part of their job description, 1,000 are junior positions with little decision-making or implementation power. Most deal with "gender" as only part of their job.
- **Leadership.** Last year, the United Nations selected another man with no discernable women's rights experience as its Secretary-General. The Commission on the Status of Women will contemplate whether women's rights are important enough to create an Under-Secretary-General position to head such concerns. It's not only important, it's essential.
- **Resources.** The budget of the (also underfunded) UN children's agency, UNICEF, is about 40 times larger than that of the UN development fund for women, UNIFEM. UN reform experts have called for vastly increased funding for women's rights, though still only a fraction of what is routinely shelled out for peace-building, children's rights, and other equally important issues. Money isn't everything, but in this context its absence is significant. It spells a lack of commitment. The question shouldn't be: are women's rights really worth it, but rather: why have we been shortchanged for so long.

#### And it's not like there isn't enough to do

Take violence against women. At least one in four women suffers violence at the hands of her husband or intimate partner. Sexual violence against women and girls has, especially in conflict areas, reached epidemic proportions. In 2006, the General Assembly set out a road-map for how the United Nations and its member states should prevent and punish violence against women. This year, the Secretary-General has launched a global campaign on this issue. But without reform and resources, the UN system will not be able to deliver the information and programs needed to bear out these good intentions.

Or how about maternal mortality? Every year over half a million women die as a result of complications related to pregnancy and childbirth. Some 8 million women a year survive such complications, but end up with life-long health consequences. The UN Millennium Campaign has gathered expertise on how to all but eliminate maternal mortality. Yet without a well-resourced women's agency empowered to help governments implement the needed reforms, our knowledge about how to save women's lives will be mostly academic. Whether the reforms succeed will depend on one thing: does the United Nations -- or rather, its member states -- possess the political will and stamina to implement them? Perhaps looking critically at the status of equality at UN Plaza will inspire some action. It certainly helped me.

The writer Advocacy Director, Women's Rights Division.

Source: Human Rights Watch.

### HUMAN RIGHTS advocacy

## In search of a free life.....

**S**HE is Tine, a lively but profound looking young girl, accompanying us through our visit to the Social Welfare-run shelter home in Pubail, Gazipur. She was walking along with me behaving like a guide, and continuously talking about her life, perhaps trying to draw my attention. 'Apa' she addressed me with honour ... 'this is our bedroom', she pointed out at the long tin shed house (having the accommodation for approximately 30 people) .... 'we have four such sheds where all of us stay. I gave a quick look at the place, more than 50 inmates are staying in this block, I noticed few mothers who were expecting and ¾ women with their kids. The room is a bit dark but it

has electricity, ceiling fan, and one television. Then we walked through a passage and found a room of size 20x15 feet approximately, this is the "Dining Hall". Today's menu is lentil broth, rice and vegetables. Tine added "Here we take our meal together", ... then she started to laugh and added that may be we die together too. 'I turned to her bluntly, "...yes Apa, she started to narrate her story again. ... "we are here for year after year, do not know why and when we will be able to return to our family! ... I lost my parents' address, do not know where they are now. We want to go home! Desperately want to return to our sweet home, some inmates tried to escape from here, some were caught red handed. ...

some managed to flee. Will you do something for us?" Her appeal drew my attention .... I turned to her but couldn't find any word to say. We ended our visit and returned to Dhaka but still I recall Tine's appeal for going home.

Like Tine, approximately 300 women, adolescent and children are staying in the Social Welfare run shelter home in Pubail and Kasimpur. With limited resource, the shelter home is providing three daily meals (Tk. 25 is per day allocation for each inmate), two sets of cloths, special meal on special days. We unfortunately discovered that, although there is no specific case against the inmates/ people living in the shelter home, most of them have been arrested under the Bengal Vagrancy Act, 1943.

Bengal Vagrancy Act, 1943 states that "...vagrant" means a person not being of European extraction found asking for alms in any public place, or wandering about or remaining in any public place in such condition or manner as makes it likely that such person exists by asking alms but does not include a person collecting money or asking for food or gifts for a prescribed purpose. [Art-1(10)]

While talking to the shelter home inmates, it was revealed that they are not vagrant people. In a common practice, the floating prostitutes are also caught under the Act. It was reported that they were caught during mass arrest/ drive, in the cities. To our knowledge, some of them used to work as domestic help. So there are some ambiguity on the definitions of vagrant and the status of the inmates who were in shelter home under this act. It is further noted that according to the Act, the Manager of a vagrants' home shall use his best endeavours to obtain outside the vagrants' home suitable employment for vagrants detained therein. (Art-17). But it was learnt from the inmates that the scope of employment is very rare.

The Act also deals with the provisions of discharging vagrants, like, if s/he obtained satisfactory employment or possessed/earned satisfactory amount for his/her living may be discharged under Manager's supervision. But the word satisfactory is not defined

and that creates hindrance in the discharging process.

#### What needs to be done?

An in-depth profile of the inmates living in the shelter home needs to be prepared to know more about them. It is obvious that a short visit like this couldn't reveal in-depth information but what we feel by studying the laws and from a brief conversation with the inmates that the arrest of these young girls from street under Vagrancy Act is not justified and there should be some effective steps to discharge the inmates... as there is no justification for keeping people under the home for no specific charge!

#### Initiative by The Daywalka Foundation

The Daywalka Foundation (TDF), an international organisation with the cooperation from G/TIP and IOM is providing specific support to the women in the shelter home. A MoU has been signed recently between TDF and the Director General Department of Social Welfare. Among others, Regional Representative IOM was present at the signing ceremony.

Under this agreement, TDF will provide free medical treatment including emergency transport/services, cost of medicine and limited hospital care. Besides, through its partner, TDF will also train the inmates on life skills and personal hygiene issues and engage the inmates in recreational and creative activities. However, the activities that we will be doing is only putting the ointments on the rash not curing the rash itself! So we need to work with the civil society group, legal experts and media to sensitise the policy makers about the law, to embark on reform, if needed, so that girls like Tina can go home! Human rights talk about dignity and freedom. Inmates in the shelter homes may have three times meal but they are not free and they don't have full control over their money, what they earned. We should transfer skills and create such environment so that they can go home, start new life of their own choice.

Resource Centre, The Daywalka Foundation.

