

Challenges, risks, and obligations for women

We need imagination to create a vision of a society, economy, polity and world order that will be equal, just and inclusive; and we need to be in the forefront and provide leadership to a shared struggle of women and men to reach that vision. We need stamina and courage, but above all, we need to be committed and have faith in our own strength to transform the world.

ROUNAQ JAHAN

THE lives of women have changed significantly ever since I was a graduate student around mid-1960s. In the last forty years gender gaps in education, employment, income, decision making and even in political leadership have been narrowed. In many countries women now outnumber men in the education system. They have a significant presence in many fields like science, medicine, business, and law, which used to be heavily dominated by men.

Women's labour force participation has also equalled to men. Marriage and family patterns have changed enabling women to have greater voice within the household, which had traditionally been a major site of women's exploitation. We have travelled far but we still face many challenges. Here I will focus on four.

Our first challenge is to shape our own identity without being defined by others. This is not always easy as our families and societies are constantly telling us who we should be. But from my

own experiences, I know that when we stand firm on what we want to be, we can break many barriers.

When I began my academic-activist life in Bangladesh around early 1970s, I stood out as a young, single woman pursuing a path unique from other women. What I find remarkable is how quickly our society changed. Change happened because I was not alone; many other women also decided to fulfil their own potentials.

Our second challenge is to improve the terms and conditions of women's work, both paid and unpaid. We all know that women's employment rates have increased significantly in the last forty years, but women's share of earned income has not been at par with their employment.

A part of the problem is that the conditions of poverty have pushed women to take any employment, no matter how poor the terms and conditions. This has resulted in women predominantly concentrated in low-paid jobs.

For example, in Bangladesh, men dominated manufacturing jobs in the 1970s. Now the situation has reversed where young women

make up a majority of the industrial workforce. Further, 80% to 90% of the workers of the garment industry are young women. This industry, which constitutes Bangladesh's main exports, annually earns 9 billion dollars whereas these women workers earn less than a dollar a day while putting in 12-14 hours.

Additionally, the burden of unpaid work in the care economy (i.e. child care, care of elderly family members, etc.) continues to be a problem for women as they expand their participation in paid employment. Getting governments and the private sector to recognise women's contribution to economic growth, their poor work conditions, and their labour in the care economy remains a major challenge for women in the future.

Our third challenge is to reduce violence against women. We have succeeded in making violence against women, particularly domestic violence, a criminal offence in many countries. But this has not resulted in any significant reduction of such violence.

Even in Sweden, which ranks number one in global women's

empowerment index, police reports of assaults on women have increased by 40% during the 1990s. What is worse is that war, political and ethnic conflicts have embraced violence against women as a part of their arsenal. In recent years, rape is seen used as a weapon in conflict situations in Asia, Africa as well as Europe.

Our final challenge is to improve women's presence in political leadership positions. With the exception of Nordic countries, where women have made significant progress, in the rest of the world progress has been extremely slow. Women in US hold only 16% of Congressional seats and 14% of ministerial positions. In India, which is a model for stable democracy in Southern countries, the progress of women is even slower, though a woman prime minister governed India for more than a decade. In India, women's share of parliamentary seats is 9% and ministerial positions are 3%.

However, these challenges cannot be effectively addressed without recognising the emerging risks for women's empowerment. I will be selective and focus on four major risks.

The first risk is the cutting of government and the public sector roles and relying more on the market/private sectors. This particularly affects poor women's health and education. From experience, we know that government laws/policies played a critical role

in improving women's conditions. Nordic women are doing better compared to women of other regions mainly because Nordic governments have been proactive. Their women friendly social policies and laws, 40/60 principle of political representation, public sector provisioning of health and education have contributed significantly in pushing Nordic countries to the top in women's empowerment index.

The second risk is the alarming class gaps between different groups of women, holding back our overall progress and creating obstacles in building a cohesive political voice. The gains women have made in the last 40-50 years have not been equitably shared.

A few examples of these disparities are: maternal deaths are 1 in 2,500 in the West, 1 in 94 in Asia, and 1 in 16 in Sub-Saharan Africa. However, along with North-South disparities there are greater inequalities within countries too. In India 43% of births are attended by skilled personnel compared to 99% in US. But disparities within India are greater than that between India and US. Only 16% of the poorest families compared to 84% of the richest families in India have skilled birth attendance. Sustaining progress means working towards reducing these disparities.

The third and related risk for women is the narrow constituency base of the women's movements. Women's movements

have played a key role, globally, in mobilising women to demand their rights, pressurise governments to enact laws, adopt policies and take specific actions. But the constituency bases of these movements have been limited to upper and middle class women only. Working class and poor women have generally not been drawn into them. This gap has considerably weakened the capacity of the women's movement to work as a strong unified political force.

The fourth risk is the backlash from conservative groups, consisting of mostly religious extremists from all religious backgrounds. In recent years, the resurgence of political use of religion has directly threatened women's rights. For example, religious extremists in US are limiting women's choice in this country; and via the gag rule are threatening reproductive rights of women globally. The secularists, championing women's rights, are politically in a much-weakened position as well. The global war on terror has further exacerbated these risks by legitimising political use of religion.

Let me finally turn to women's obligations. Again, I will be selective and highlight only four.

Our first obligation is to ourselves. As mentioned earlier, we need to stand up for our rights, be constantly vigilant and ever ready

promote our rights.

Our second obligation is to assist the less privileged women in our own countries and globally. We may all have our own paid and unpaid work responsibilities, but we still need to volunteer for civic and political actions that address inequities and exclusion.

Our third obligation is to recognise the critical role that education has played in fuelling women's progress. Millions of girls and women around the world are still denied access to education, particularly quality education. Girls account for more than half of the 57 million children who are out of school. We need to move beyond simple knowledge generation. We have to get involved in quiet initiatives as well as public campaigns to ensure that quality education becomes available to all of the world's citizens.

Finally, we need imagination to create a vision of a society, economy, polity and world order that will be equal, just and inclusive; and we need to be in the forefront and provide leadership to a shared struggle of women and men to reach that vision. We need stamina and courage, but above all, we need to be committed and have faith in our own strength to transform the world.

The above is an abridged version of Dr. Jahan's address to the Radcliffe Institute for Advanced Study on receipt of the Graduate Society Award, June 2008.



Taking risks.



Facing challenges.



Fulfilling obligation.

Educating street children

The salience and topicality of education as a means of broad-based empowerment are now unequivocally established, both amongst the academics and the development practitioners. This observation is especially relevant for the street children as one of the most disadvantaged and marginal sections of the society. The OAS campaign, despite all the limitations, does offer some rays of hope. This interesting initiative deserves immediate attention from our policy planners, academics, and development practitioners.

NIJAZ AHMED KHAN

STREET children constitute one of the most vulnerable and marginal groups in Bangladesh. "Street children" are essentially the boys and girls for whom the streets, unoccupied dwellings, wastelands etc., have become homes and/or sources of livelihood, and who are inadequately protected or supervised by responsible adults.

Government statistics, based on a survey by the Bangladesh Institute of Development Studies, estimate the number of street children in Bangladesh to be around 380,000 -- of whom 55% are in Dhaka city. A little less than half of them (49.2%) are of the age group < 10 years, while the remaining fall in the age group of 11-19 years. Their gender composition is as follows: boys 74.3%, while girls account for 25.7%. The above report estimates that by 2014 the number of such children would exceed 930,000.

The major problems of street children are: Insecure life; physical and sexual abuse by adults of the

immediate community; harassment by law enforcing agencies; no, or inadequate, access to educational institutions and healthcare facilities; and lack of decent employment opportunity.

The role of appropriate education for empowerment of children -- especially the disadvantaged groups like the street or working children -- has been unequivocally established. Article 17 of the Constitution of Bangladesh recognises the right to education for all -- including the disadvantaged children.

The National Plan of Action for Children (2005-2010) also clearly emphasises the urgent need for "education and empowerment." Along the same vein, the National Poverty Reduction Strategy of the country provides for education as a means of "empowerment of disadvantaged groups" -- including children.

Notwithstanding the above official rhetoric, and despite a growing recognition of their vulnerability and disadvantaged status, there have been strikingly limited efforts to improve the

condition of street children -- especially by providing them with appropriate basic education. It will not be an exaggeration to note that this section of our society has largely remained outside the main ambit of developmental interventions.

Much to the relief of all those who want, and aspire, to see a better future for our street children, there have been a few encouraging, albeit limited, efforts to educate them through Open Air Schools (OAS). These schools are managed and administered by a number of national NGOs, mainly in metropolitan cities.

The schools are strategically located, covering the city-entry points and/or working places for street children, such as railway, launch and bus terminals, market places on riverbanks, busy city markets, parks, etc. The street school spots are typically acquired (often free of cost) from the community or relevant public authorities.

A typical school functions for two to three hours everyday for up to six days a week. School operating

hours are decided so that they do not interfere with the working hours of the children. Prior to commencement of classes, the concerned staff (development workers, teachers) walk around the neighbouring area to identify newly arrived children and to invite regular children to classes.

The learning materials predominantly focus on various life skills related topics. To cite a typical example, the schools run by the NGO Aparajeyo Bangladesh use an open learning package that includes the following topics: Life skills, child rights, child labour, protection from sexual abuse and exploitation (including trafficking), creating dreams, keeping safe on the streets, dealing with the police, and HIV/AIDS/STI prevention. The idea is to create an educational foundation amongst the targeted children by blending pedagogical and practical life skills.

Based on my recent experience and interactions with a number of such schools (and the key stakeholders including school staff, children, representatives of the surrounding local communities), a number of problems can be identified regarding the contents and conduct of the life skills training and capacity development sessions imparted in the schools:

- The mixed age groups of children make it difficult for the educators to respond to age-specific needs, maturity and queries. For very minor children (aged 6 to 10), for example, sessions on fairly technical topics (e.g. sexual abuse,

arsenic contamination, legal issues of child trafficking) are not easily comprehensible.

- The time of the training (2 to 3 hours including the time for rapport building) is considered insufficient by most educators.
- Some terminologies and technical jargons used in the training sessions are not easily amenable to children's understanding.
- The schools run on bare minimum logistics and facilities, and lack any protection from weather fluctuations in the rainy and winter seasons.
- As the children hail from varied geographical locations and cultures, some staff noted that diversity and variations in language (including accents and dialects) sometimes make uniform conduct of training sessions difficult.
- Some training materials are not in adequate supply. Use of audio-visual materials is strikingly limited.
- In the OAS, ensuring and maintaining regular presence of the children, who often tend to be highly mobile and restless, is a huge challenge.
- Although most educators/trainers have basic relevant training (to a varying degree), advanced training on teaching techniques and tools is clearly inadequate.

It may be relevant at this point to think about and furnish some clues on improving the effectiveness of the OAS campaign. Some such ideas include the following:

- The training topics, session time, and contents need to be reviewed and analysed by appropriately qualified experts and practitioners in order to make them more consistent, comprehensible and adaptive to the specific age and intellectual development of the targeted children and the local context.
- To ensure "age-content compatibility," some educators and trainers opined that the children may be divided into two groups -- up to 11 years of age, and 12 years and above.
- The logistical requirements of the OAS should be reviewed.
- A need assessment for all teachers and trainers should be carried out, and further training such as advanced training on teaching techniques (preferably tailored-made to the street children) and training of trainers may be considered.
- The contents and mode of delivery of various training and capacity development initiatives should more clearly focus on (and lean towards) a "right-based approach" as distinct from mere philanthropic orientations.
- As far as possible, the training contents and literature should use visual and pictorial materials as well as physical demonstrations, where applicable. Other experimental models of training and learning may provide valuable lessons in this regard. (The relevant materials developed by such institutions as CMES, Breaking the Silence, Fulki

Chittagong etc. may be consulted in this regard).

- Along the same vein, the training methodologies used in these schools need to be reviewed by appropriately qualified experts. Emphasis may be given to use of learning by doing, mock sessions, and various illustrative tools.
- The concerned staff should have systematic and regular consultations with the targeted children and community people before designing and/or implementing any training scheme, especially about its contents, time and location.
- Female children should be given preference, or at least equal opportunity, in availing various skills development training.

The salience and topicality of education as a means of broad-based empowerment are now unequivocally established, both amongst the academics and the development practitioners. This observation is especially relevant for the street children as one of the most disadvantaged and marginal sections of the society. The OAS campaign, despite all the limitations, does offer some rays of hope. This interesting initiative deserves immediate attention from our policy planners, academics, and development practitioners.

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Take us out from this ...



... through this ...



... to being part of this.



Poke me and I will friend you, he said

MILLIONS of computer-users around the planet are now communicating with each other through Facebook, which is a sort of on-screen school year-book with a page for every person on earth.

That's fine. But what is not fine is that its bizarre language and conventions are starting to creep into real life. "I poked you. Will you friend me?" someone said to me the other day.

This is worrying. Here's how relationships in the future will develop as Facebook becomes increasingly influential.

Boy meets girl. Boy pokes girl. "Ow! What did you do that for?" she complains.

"It is how relationships start according to Facebook," says the boy, whose name is Peter Lee. "Now you have to poke me back."

"What if I don't want to?" says the girl, whose name is Meena Das.

"If you do, you are allowed to look at my profile," he replies.

Curious, she stabs her finger into his shoulder. He immediately turns to stand at a right angle to her so she can see the side of his face. "You can now look at my profile."

"You're weird."

"No. Poking is the first stage of a relationship. Studying a person's profile is the second."

"And the third?"

He pulls out two large pieces of blank white card from an art portfolio bag. "Stage three is to write on each other's walls."

"Do we write poetry? Or do some sort of art?"

Peter shakes his head. "Nah. We just write inane phrases or we forward ancient jokes."

She watches to see if he writes anything clever or witty, but he just writes words she doesn't understand: "Whassup? LOL."

Then he walks purposefully across the road. She follows. They enter the offices of an outdoor advertising company. He leases electronic billboards on top of a building for them both.

"What are we doing this for?"

"Stage four. Facebook requires us to have a public answer at all times for a question, which is asked automatically: 'What are you doing right now?' The answer must be in the third person."

He types sentences, which appear on the billboard above them: "Peter Lee is typing this sentence. Peter Lee feels the need to go to the toilet. Peter Lee is in the toilet."

He goes to the toilet.

Two minutes later, he emerges to find that the girl is adjusting her make-up. He starts tapping on the keyboard that operates her electronic billboard. "Meena Das has updated her profile," he writes.

Meena is impatient. "Can't we do normal boy-girl stuff, like go on dates and stuff? You give me your phone number and I'll give you mine."

Peter shakes his head. "No. Guidelines recommend we don't exchange personal details. It is not good to get too close to other users you meet through the Facebook friend system. Goodbye."

She notices that he is walking away with his finger in front of him. "What are you doing?"

"I am going to go and poke all your friends."

She's outraged. "You can't do that. They're my friends."

"Yes, I can. Now I'm in your network, your friends are my friends too."

Meena stamps her foot. "Loads of shallow acquaintanceships and inane games, but no real relationships or commitment. This Facebook thing was started by boys, wasn't it?" she says.

"Yes," says Peter. "How did you guess?"

If you have to go to Facebook, at least visit our columnist's page: www.facebook.com.