



Claiming our ground

We all can; we all do. Women who walk to work, the factory-workers claiming the miles, mothers taking kids to school, women out shopping, morning walkers, women out for no reason, just because they feel like it, are all breaking the bonds.

SHABNAM NADIYA

SIXTEEN, waist-length hair in a thick braid, still uncertain of my way solo in Dhaka, climbing into a rickshaw. I nearly get jerked onto the street as two young boys pull me by my hair and cycle off. It was fun. For them, I mean. Me? I looked at the people smirking around me as the rickshaw-driver helped me back onto the rickshaw. Instead of going to class at Chhayanaut, I went home to chop off my hair in a style that didn't suit me at all and annoyed my mother no end, but left my hair so short that no one could possibly grab hold of it again.

As a teenager, self-mutilation was my expression of frustration and anger at the apathy that surrounded me. No one really took this kind of harassment seriously. Boys will be boys, right? They were just looking and making remarks, and that's natural for boys. And for girls too -- to be

ogled and teased. Sometimes things went a bit too far, and there would be groping involved.

But hey, girls weren't supposed to be in such places/situations by themselves anyway, right? Like that girl who was gang-molested on New Year's Eve at Dhaka University...what was she doing there at midnight anyway? And that girl Simi, who committed suicide because she couldn't take the teasing. Why was she out late, walking home by herself anyway? Or the Jahangirnagar girl who was harassed by friends of a boyfriend she'd broken up with. They had every right to do this...she had exhibited her loose morals by dating their friend, hadn't she? Or me, a glass of water poured on my feet as I waited for a bus; flashed by an elderly man as I walked to Holy Cross College; buttocks squeezed by unknown hands as I checked out books at Nilkhet.

I remember the Dhaka streets two decades ago, when I first started roaming

the city. Women on foot, by themselves were a rarity; nice girls had chaperones and didn't traipse the streets by themselves. Coming from a rickshawless townlet, where one walked everywhere, I tried that out in Dhaka as well. I got stares bordering on the hostile, propositions from men who thought me a prostitute, and of course numerous comments.

And then the streets changed; the garments meye phenomenon occurred, and the bhodomohila barrier was overturned. The young girls banding together to avoid those same groping hands and invasive eyes on their way to and from their workplaces made us see and be seen; their slogged miles granted us visibility where almost none had existed.

At sixteen, I hacked off my braid (as if it was my hair that was at fault). Today I see not-particularly-religious girls wearing the borkha (for convenience, they say, and later, na apu, it really doesn't work), parents marrying them off young, while some commit suicide -- coping strategies of the powerless.

Today, I'm no longer powerless. The elderly bearded man who accosted me during my morning walk at Dhanmondi lake, claiming that I was "corrupting the young boys who came to exercise" because I was dressed obscenely (slacks, fotua,

orna?), got such an earful that he never dared look me in the eyes again. The man I forced off the bus in the middle of nowhere on the Dhaka-Savar route will think twice before trying to grope another woman. What I'm telling these men is this; this is my turf, as much mine as yours.

When women are out on the street (and a lot of times even in their own homes), a hundred pairs of eyes violate us, a hundred pairs of hands grab at us. Catcalls poison our ears, obscene remarks ride roughshod over our sense of identity and place. And when these intrusions shake us into protest, then descends the gender-weighted sledgehammer of society/tradition. Who can break the bonds that make us hobble instead of run?

We all can; we all do. Women who walk to work, the factory-workers claiming the miles, mothers taking kids to school, women out shopping, morning walkers, women out for no reason, just because they feel like it, are all breaking the bonds. Men walk with us, beside us. Bit by bit, hard-fought inch by hard-fought inch, we're getting there, we're staking our claim.

Let's do it. Let's walk, let's run, let's fly. Let's take back our streets. Power to us.

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'Walk down the road with your eyes down'

I was scared of the street in front of my neighbour's house, the street to school, the street that was meant to go anywhere. Being scared of the street meant that I was frightened to go anywhere. I was confused with my limits of mobility, with using my body to walk on, crossing corners, jump and run.

JAHANARA NURI

WALK down the road with your eyes down. This was a piece of advice I received from my father the day I first went to school. This amusing piece of advice can also be treated as a warning to a girl.

The result of this was tremendous. I used to be frightened to walk on the thin narrow streets -- which were occupied mostly by rickshaws, and every now and then by cars and rarely by buses playing from our town to the suburbs or adjacent towns. I was treated as a shy girl because I used to keep my eyes on the street while walking.

The neighbour's son, the self-claimed fiancé of the shy girl, would ask loudly: "How many *paisas* have we picked today Selim?" There was no one who could be called Selim in sight! Only the shy girl, the street and the young man drawing attention to himself from someone who would not look at him anyway.

I was scared of the street in front of my neighbour's house, the street to school, the street that was meant to go anywhere. Being scared of the street meant that I was frightened to go anywhere. I was confused with my limits of mobility, with using my body to walk on, crossing corners, jump and run. Everybody used to say that I was a little, shy, nice girl. My fear made me nice.

But when I came to Dhaka as a day-dreaming student at the age of seventeen, walking on the roads of the capital with eyes cast down was worse. City roads are for the vehicles, passers-by have little right on them.

The time I came out of my house, the daily tour towards knowledge began to be a sad tour. Touring the city to go

towards your goal to serve the country and assist your people turned a sad one. I began to feel the city, the roads, the community; none agreed with my existence here. I was not needed. I was nobody. I was just an addition to the spectrum of the goalless motions, circles, dashes, commas, questions, winks, low voice sex proposals and suddenly thrown out remarks of lives whirling, circling, running, hornoring around me. I am an audience of the ultimately declining and falling of the beliefs on value of lives, humans, and of the pride of great Mother Nature.

In the last twenty years the cities of our great republic had done away with the villages, the classic families, the shyness to look at the girls with wild heartbeats and shaken smiles. I grew more towards getting further knowledge about our cities, lives and the republic. Our roads grew wider, longer, with prolonged traffic jam, but the attitude towards me of those who uses roads has not grown much.

I am still scared of crossing roads because drivers do not care for the passers-by. Passers-by do not care for the rules for crossing. While building the roads builders do not care for the future of our people. While walking alone on the footpaths crowded with vendors of everything on earth, an unnecessary rubbing against my body, a sharp whistle or a murmured sex proposal from someone passing-by still pierce me like a sharp knife. We are heading forwards but we have not left behind the hidden mind that is still not free and that approves even less to women of the freedom to keep a pace with the motion the country is set to go forward.

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Frogs and snakes

No, Yes, of course, I am still walking the streets. What potholes, so what? The stares, let them continue, I won't stop. The sun shines for me too you know, and it rains a bit for me in between summer and winter.

IFFAT NAWAZ

SHE said: "Yes it's insane here, and it's lonely here and at the same time it's crowded here. Hearts are broken at a fast pace, hearts are given even faster... I am trying to breathe but instead I keep crying."

She said: "I try to walk the streets, but they keep staring at me, men and women both. Yesterday a man commented about how my *orna* wasn't covering my chest completely, he said it was all showing, yet I was dressed fully well. A missing layer of

chiffon over my one breast made me feel like I was a prostitute, I wanted to scream."

She said: "I am happy here, no really, believe me I am. I find the mud and the rain the sun and the shade all very pleasing. No I rather not live anywhere else, here is where I belong, no really, seriously believe me."

She said: "Last night there was a strange knock on the door or so I thought, then I figured it was the wind. The other day my bedroom door opened automatically in the middle of the night, I don't believe in ghosts, just humans, the ghostly and the

un-ghostly ones."

She said: "My mother would kill me if she found out. So I don't tell her half the things, or maybe it's more than half. Food poisoning and new films are safe topics with her, not my rickshaw rides in dark streets or how I think independence here is more of a mental declaration than physical."

She said: "I spotted a snake eating a frog near the lake. The snake swallowed the frog whole, it looked miserably ugly, the dance of death was so blatantly visible. I sensed the frog's last breath and I wanted to throw up. A few kids broke my concentration, they were also watching. They clapped when the snake successfully killed his prey. I walked away thinking of things that can fly."

She said: "I was wearing a sleeveless *kamiz*, it was a hot day. A woman walked by me with her boyfriend, I smiled at her. She said loudly to her boyfriend 'is there a

shortage of fabric in Bangladesh?' I could hear my smile fall and hit the ground with a suicidal thump. I wanted to say something back but instead went back to my scowling-protective-Dhaka face while my bare arms felt unnecessary guilt."

She said: "No, Yes, of course, I am still walking the streets. What potholes, so what? The stares, let them continue, I won't stop. The sun shines for me too you know, and it rains a bit for me in between summer and winter. I need to feel it along with the dust and the busy hands waving, groping, protecting. I know my rights, and the road also belongs to me."

She said all of that in one breath, and the road followed behind her, her shadow elongated with the falling sun, and I chased it till I could fly.

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Please come join Drishtipat-organised *Ey Poth Amadero* walk/run/bike starting at 4 pm in front of the national museum on April 11 tomorrow. The walk will end at Robindro Sarabar where there will be a concert by Anusheh and Krishnokoli. The Daily Star is a media partner for the event.

Coping with the global crisis

The government should not once again legalise black money. This is morally indefensible and provides incentive for continued perpetration of illegal activities. The provision in the present budget for legally earned but undeclared income (against which tax was not paid when income was earned) may be retained.

MIRZA AZIZUL ISLAM

IN light of the analysis in the first part of this article printed in yesterday's Daily Star, here I provide 12 suggestions that may be considered in designing future policies.

1. There should be no active intervention by Bangladesh Bank to devalue the currency.

2. The exports of the garments sector, both woven and knit, have not yet been hit in value terms. The argument that the exporters are facing decline in unit price does not seem to have any objective basis. Jul-Oct 2008 data show that the growth of both knitwear and woven garments in value marginally exceeded the growth in volume. Hence, the unit price could not have

fallen. There is no case for enhanced cash incentive.

3. Withdrawal of VAT from utility and other services used by the garments sector does not merit any consideration. These constitute an insignificant proportion of the total production cost; withdrawal would cause loss of revenue with no benefit in terms of production or exports.

4. There was a considerable reduction of import duties on capital machinery, raw materials, and intermediate goods in the present budget, leading to a notable increase in the effective rate of protection for production for the domestic market. Exporters are entitled to such facilities as duty drawback, bonded warehouse, highly preferential income tax and cash incentives ranging from 5 percent to 20 percent.

The duty structure, therefore, need not be revisited. But once the present crisis is over, effective rate of protection should be gradually reduced. Export subsidies should also be reduced or eliminated.

5. The argument that our competitor countries have announced revision of duty structure and/or other support measures for exports leading to erosion of our competitive advantage should be treated with a grain of salt. As noted earlier, Bangladesh has not experienced loss of market share in exports. Besides, the total incidence of tax/subsidy inclusive of all these measures needs to be considered in comparison with the incidence in Bangladesh, along with labour cost differential. Besides, in all these countries revenue/GDP ratios are double that of Bangladesh.

6. Among the export sub-sectors which may have been hit by the global crisis, as noted earlier, raw jute, jute goods, tea, and agricultural products suffered a decline in export values even before the crisis, in FY07. It needs to be investigated as to whether the present problems in these areas arise from domestic production predicaments or external demand decline. In the latter case, the scope for switching from exports to domestic market should

also be explored.

7. Overall, a lot of fiscal action does not seem to be needed yet. However, the government may consider setting up an Export Stabilisation Fund. In the event some of the negative signs noted before become durable, support may be provided from this fund in the form of loan at subsidised rate for a period not exceeding two years. Those exporters who have not yet been hit should also contribute to the fund.

8. In administering the above fund, the government needs to explicitly distinguish between solvency and liquidity. It would be logical to maintain that the impact of the global crisis would be in the nature of a temporary liquidity problem which should be over as the crisis abates, most likely by early 2010. The fund should not be used to rescue enterprises which are inherently insolvent because of structural deficiencies.

9. There is a strong case for reducing the spread between deposit rate offered and lending rate charged by banks. The main impediments in this area have to do with collusive behaviour on the part of private commercial banks and lack of any effective instrument at the disposal of the government or the central bank to enforce the reduction

of spread. It is time to tell the bankers firmly that they should reduce the spread within a definite time, failing which the government should initiate legislative action.

10. The need for increasing public expenditure in Bangladesh cannot be over-emphasised, with or without the global crisis. The rationale lies in the high incidence of poverty and inadequacy of both physical and social infrastructure. Expansion of social safety net could include returning migrant workers, particularly those whose employment was terminated before the end of contract. Public expenditure on training/retraining of these as well other workers employable abroad should be augmented. However, the increase in public expenditure will have to be balanced against the potential to increase domestic revenue and external assistance so as to maintain domestic deficit financing within acceptable limits -- no more than 3 percent of GDP (note that the current budget already contains significant fiscal stimulus, raising overall deficit and domestic financing to 5 per cent and 2.8 percent of GDP respectively). NBR should be more pro-active to plug leakages, particularly in the area of import duty, which has seen slow growth despite

22 percent increase in import value during Jul-Dec 2008 period.

11. The expansionary fiscal policy stance on the expenditure side should be complemented by mildly expansionary monetary policy. The enterprises which face liquidity problems due to the global crisis may be given relief in the form of extended maturity of loans, more liberal rescheduling facilities, etc. But no enterprise should be allowed access to both monetary policy benefits and export stabilisation fund. The emphasis on greater flow of credit to SMEs, women entrepreneurs and IT ventures initiated during the caretaker government's tenure should be strengthened. But the overall flow of credit to the private sector should not exceed 20 percent, taking into account the likely growth of GDP and inflation.

12. The government should not once again legalise black money. This is morally indefensible and provides incentive for continued perpetration of illegal activities. The provision in the present budget for legally earned but undeclared income (against which tax was not paid when income was earned) may be retained.

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