

One big hurdle down

It's finally here -- institutional recognition of sexual harassment. 11 years after the JU case, and many hundreds of silenced and vocal cases in between, the High Court has directed the government to make a sexual harassment law based on the guidelines.

HANA SHAMS AHMED

JUST like it took the rape of three women students at Jahangirnagar University (JU) to recognise what an extreme form sexual harassment had taken at the universities it took the suicide of Art College student Simi Banu to bring to mass consciousness the extreme forms "eve teasing" has now taken in this country. And until the defiant JU students took to the streets in 1998, the mere concept of "sexual harassment" in educational institutions was only spoken about in hushed tones among girl students at the university halls.

But now it's finally here -- institutional recognition of sexual harassment. 11 years after the JU case, and many hundreds of silenced and vocal cases in between, the High Court has directed the government to make a sexual harassment law based on the guidelines drawn up by lawyers and human rights activists.

The effort by BNWLA lawyers to fight this case was very commendable. The news got even better when the High Court made another positive ruling in another case being fought by human rights organisations and eminent citizens -- directing neutral authorities to re-open the sexual harassment case

concerning a teacher of the drama department of JU.

Many of us never accepted the absurd reasons given by the JU university authorities for exonerating the teacher in the first place. The charges of sexual harassment filed against him by four girl students (and many others corroborating), the authorities found to be not "beyond reasonable doubt." There were no eyewitnesses, they claimed. Those who were placed in mediating positions by the university authorities actually expected a teacher to carry out a sexually intimidating act in front of eyewitnesses!

Formal, written complaints from four girls who were putting their academic career on the line in such an unreceptive university environment should be substantial enough evidence against a person in authority to carry out an investigation. After the student campaign to get justice in the JU case failed, one of the girls who was very actively involved attempted suicide, but the authorities continued to show indifference.

Thankfully, the High Court decision negates the university authority's wall of silence and non-cooperation. The court recognised that in cases of sexual harassment it is not always required to prove allegations. Although a group of JU teach-



A successful student campaign against sexual harassment.

ers in collaboration with human rights activists had drawn up a set of guidelines against sexual harassment, they were never adopted by the authorities. Now, the guidelines accepted by the High Court will

be applicable to all educational institutions, workplaces and even public places until a formal law is passed. There will also be a five-member harassment complaint committee headed by a woman at every

workplace and institution to investigate allegations of harassment of women.

In Bangladesh more women are visible in the public sphere than ever before. And it is not just men who preach obscurantism

under the veil of religion who are uncomfortable with this visibility. Supposedly progressive men who have gone through the mainstream education system and worked in supposedly progressive institutions too get uncomfortable and uncooperative at women's presence in places formerly dominated by men.

This was recently illustrated in a meeting which discussed what problems are faced by women in work environments. These women complained that men who work with them form groups to bully them. From making sexually suggestive comments, to watching pornography in the women's presence, it has all been experienced. One woman complained that she would often arrive at work and turn on her computer to find that someone had replaced her wallpaper with a nude woman's photo.

Drishtipat recently organised an event, EyPoth Amadero, to raise awareness about eve teasing in public places. The JU students and a section of the progressive teachers have been writing and campaigning against sexual harassment for years. The two High Court judgements are just a first step against a form of exploitation that has been put up with for too long.

Now come the challenges of next steps. How quickly will the government pass the comprehensive laws required by these court decisions? How many educational institutions and workplaces will abide by these guidelines? Will employers and administrative authorities be open to recognise this abuse that is all-pervasive? The acid test of the success of this HC directive will only come in its actual implementation.

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Why BNP should join the budget session

In a country like Bangladesh, where democracy has not yet taken a deep root, the political parties, particularly the ruling party or the principal leadership, must do everything towards developing a political culture that would contribute to the successful functioning of democracy.

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TWO English language national dailies reported last week that influential MPs of BNP had met the party chairperson and leader of the opposition and suggested "boycotting of budget session" of the ninth parliament to protest the continued repression on the opposition. The party chairperson is yet to decide the matter, but sources in the BNP say that she might decide in favour of boycotting the upcoming budget session.

In a parliamentary system, the opposition party often refers to itself as a shadow government. Therefore, the opposition should so conduct itself in

parliament as to persuade the people of the country that it could be an improvement on the government of the day. Keeping the above in view as well as to raise and discuss the following issues in the House, the BNP, one of the two largest political parties in the country, should join the forthcoming budget session.

Budget is the annual financial statement or the statement of the estimated receipts and expenditure of the government of Bangladesh in respect of each financial year. Rules of procedure (ROP) of parliament contain the details on the presentation, discussion, voting, and passage of the budget.

The pertinent point here is that the

House is at liberty to discuss the budget as a whole or any question of principle involved in it. The opposition BNP can scrutinise the budget to see whether the priority sectors have got the necessary allocations and whether the government has given priority to containment of its non-productive expenditures and, if not, suggest alternative ways. The treasury bench may not accept the suggestions made by the BNP, but people will appreciate them.

In addition, without any agreement with Bangladesh, India has initiated a move to construct a dam over the cross-boundary river Barak which enters into Bangladesh through the Sylhet region before meeting the Meghna. Millions of people are dependent on hundreds of water bodies, fed by the Barak, in the Sylhet region for fishing and agricultural activities.

According to our water experts and environmentalists, the construction of the dam will dry up the river and water bodies in the lower riparian Bangladesh and thereby adversely affect its economy and ecology. While addressing the annual general meeting of Jalalabad

Association at Bangladesh Shishu Academy on May 16, the finance minister said that the Tipaimukh dam would desert the greater Sylhet region by drying up the rivers Surma, Kushiara and Meghna as well as the haors. While attending the budget session, the BNP may raise the issue in the House.

Our expatriate workers' earnings, according to the chairman of the parliamentary standing committee on expatriate welfare and overseas employment ministry, is around 2.5 times the foreign exchange earnings of \$4 billion from the RMG sector. Thus it is disheartening to learn that 8,107 Bangladeshi workers died in the foreign soil between January 2004 and May 2009.

It is argued by the government that 8,107 deaths in five years among 6 million expatriate workers is not a significant cause for alarm. But what is alarming is to the common people and the near and dear ones of those unfortunate persons is that rights groups are pointing to maltreatment by employers and premature health complications such as heart diseases as major causes for

death.

The case demands discussion in the House to find out ways to investigate these deaths, and negotiate with the governments of countries that are major destinations for these workers to offer better health coverage and protection of rights.

The home minister has admitted the deterioration in the law and order situation, but failed to do something effective to improve it. The situation is rather deteriorating with every passing day. Business leaders have expressed serious concern about the deteriorated law and order.

A recent online poll by The Daily Star shows that 80% have opined that deteriorating law and order situation is hampering the business. The criminals are allegedly getting protection from the political godfathers. We find truth in this allegation when some police officials say that the criminals now find it a comfortable environment. The BNP may raise the matter in the House under the rule relating to matters of urgent public interest.

The BNP high command has said

more than once that BNP would fight for the causes of the people both inside and outside the parliament. This has received the appreciation of the people. The BNP MPs not only represent the people of their constituencies, but the country as a whole as the elected opposition.

To conclude, the success of parliamentary democracy depends upon the democratic spirit of tolerance, devoted sense of respect and relentless response towards institutionalism of democracy. In a country like Bangladesh, where democracy has not yet taken a deep root, the political parties, particularly the ruling party or the principal leadership, must do everything towards developing a political culture that would contribute to the successful functioning of democracy. To attain this objective, the ruling leadership must, inter alia, respect the opinion of the opposition, resolve all political disputes with the spirit of democracy, take all steps to make parliament effective.

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Living with disasters

We live in a society where children are already the most vulnerable group. Climate change makes them even more vulnerable. Given the inevitability and pace of climate change, it is imperative to ensure that the special needs of children are addressed under disaster risk reduction strategies.

A.K. ENAMUL HAQUE

ON April 14, 2008, Reuters ran a story on the impact of climate change on Bangladesh. It said: "Abdul Majid has been forced to move 22 times in as many years, a victim of the annual floods that ravage Bangladesh. There are millions like Majid, 65, in Bangladesh and in the future there could be many millions more if scientists' predictions of rising seas and more intense droughts and storms come true."

The fourth assessment report of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) concluded that as many as 1 million people of Bangladesh will be climate refugees by 2050 due to sea level rise in the Ganges-Brahmaputra-Meghna basins in Bangladesh. In the short run, however, the report has predicted severe changes in weather patterns resulting from global warming, which would lead to increased frequency of natural disasters like drought, flood, tornado and cyclone in Bangladesh. Therefore, both in the short-run as well as in the long run, Bangladesh will have to bear with the

effects of climate change.

The chain of events following a disaster can be predicted. Floods, for example, destroy property, damage crops, hinder mobility of people, and cause diarrhea/cholera. Cyclones affect properties and lives, create food shortages, bring in diseases, and so on. At the same time, there will be "climate refugees" -- the people affected by river-bank erosions -- and the threat of poverty. The IPCC report predicts that this will be aggravated by loss of land and degradation of land due to rise of water level and rise of salinity in coastal areas.

Who is affected by this? The answer is clear -- children are the most affected group, followed by women and the elderly. It is therefore, important to understand the impact of climate change from these perspectives.

A recently published Save the Children-UK study on the impact of climate change on children reveals; first, poverty will remain deep-rooted; second, the health and nutrition status of people and the children will deteriorate further; and third, the likelihood of diseases like malaria, jaundice, diarrhea, and similar water-borne diseases

will increase in Bangladesh. However, it is also true that the whole of Bangladesh will not be affected by disasters similarly and simultaneously.

Bangladesh is a disaster prone country. Climate change is unlikely to bring in any new types of disasters, rather it will intensify and aggravate the effects of these disasters. Given this background, we can assess the impact of climate change on children -- particularly from the poor households.

To analyse the impacts, the Save the Children-UK study divided Bangladesh into zones of natural disasters like flood and flash flood, cyclone, and drought prone zones. The results provide a better understanding of the socio-economic impacts of climate change on children.

The flood prone zones, consisting of almost all the districts except greater districts of Dinajpur, Rajshahi, Kushtia, Jessore, Chittagong Hills, and the coastal areas (nearly 70% land mass of Bangladesh), will experience severe food shortages because of crop losses due to untimely or prolonged floods.

Low-lying flood plains of Rangpur, Dhaka, and upper Barisal regions, and the haor regions of Sylhet are affected by both the pre-monsoon flash floods and the regular flood. Food shortages will also affect these areas. Prolonged flooding will reduce availability of food, intensify poverty, accelerate migration of young and working adults, increase divorce and separation in the families, as well as cause more forced vacations in schools. Women and children living



The most vulnerable victims of climate change.

in these areas will be severely affected by climate change. Children in these areas are likely to take up hazardous

jobs, leave school, suffer more from diseases like malaria, pneumonia, diarrhea and jaundice, get involved in

crimes and suffer abuse in the society.

The cyclone and tidal surge prone areas are in the coastal zones. These areas will be affected by the immediate and the long-term effects of climate change. Food shortages and migration will significantly increase in the area as the impact of climate change intensifies. Children of these areas will suffer from malnutrition, diseases like diarrhea, skin irritations, pneumonia, and jaundice. School drop-out rate will be on the rise, and children are likely to get absorbed in hazardous jobs.

Drought prone areas are located in greater Dinajpur and Rajshahi. Climate change will moderately affect these areas. However, the extent of damages might multiply if availability of surface water drops dramatically, either due to drought in India or upstream diversion of water. Malnutrition will also increase in these areas. Migration of adults will affect the children, but the impact will be moderate.

We live in a society where children are already the most vulnerable group. Climate change makes them even more vulnerable to diseases, displacement, exploitation and abuse. Given the inevitability and pace of climate change, it is imperative to ensure that the special needs of children are addressed under disaster risk reduction strategies as well as emergency preparedness and emergency response.

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