

BDR-BSF talks

Border deaths must end

THE remarks of the DG BDR on the eve of the top level meeting between the border security forces of Bangladesh and India, to the effect that the BSF at the field level is not apparently aware of new Delhi's thrust towards a new era of good relationship with Bangladesh, deserve consideration.

We are constrained to say that the spirit of the policies adopted by the government in Delhi do not permeate down to the operational level, particularly to those in whose action it should be most obvious. It is imperative that policy guidelines reach the grassroots, particularly when those are related to a sensitive area like that of the borders. And this is sadly reflected in the deaths of Bangladeshis due to BSF firing, which stand at 78 between January 2009 and February of this year.

It need hardly be repeated that the border is a symbol of sovereignty where the bilateral relationship is tested out on a daily basis. It is, therefore, disconcerting to see that in the border, where amity, cordiality and equanimity are the most essential features that ought to prevail constantly, those necessary conditions are woefully missing.

In the light of the above it appears that management of the border has turned out to be a challenge indeed. Admittedly, there are ambiguities in the manner laid out for handling border issues in spite of the Land Boundary Accord of 1974 and the 1975 Joint Guidelines for Border Authorities, which should have been resolved by now. That notwithstanding, we fail to understand why the BSF has to resort to firing on unarmed Bangladeshis. It is in clear breach of the existing agreements; apart from the fact that it is inhuman, we wonder whether any purpose is served by the random killings.

There is a talk of beginning of a new era of friendship between the two neighbours as reflected in the joint statement. We feel that the tangible manifestation of it should be in the border areas where the changed circumstances must have its visible reflection. But we are faltering there. While it takes time for results of economic and trade cooperation to become evident, the dividend of new policies towards improving bilateral relationship would be nowhere more instant and visible than in the border.

While the chiefs of the two border forces are at the moment meeting to iron out the nitty-gritty at the operational level, it will be well to keep in mind that there are a few outstanding border issues that the political leaders of the two countries should address immediately so that those are resolved without further delay to the satisfaction of both the countries.

DMCH ambulance service

Coming 30 years too late!

IT is really shocking to learn that the DMCH, the premier hospital of the country, ran even without the most rudimentary of a facility namely an ambulance service of its own for the last 30 years! What is a shade more disconcerting is that the realisation of the anomaly has dawned so late. It is very difficult to even think of a modern hospital having no ambulance service.

But it comes not only too late but also as too little. Obviously, only four ambulances for around 24,000 patients seeking treatment at the hospital every day, are far from adequate.

Strangely enough, the need for having ambulance is not felt that acutely by public hospitals in the city. Most of them do not have the number of ambulances coming anywhere near the required mark. For example, the Mitford Hospital has had only three for nearly 800 patients seeking treatment everyday.

It is also not at all clear how the ambulance service, which once existed at the DMCH, could be suspended by the decision makers. The patients and their families had to pay a heavy price during those long 30 years. The hospital management could get away with just telling them that they had no ambulance of their own and that they had to rely on private ambulances which usually demanded a huge amount of money, what with their shoddy service. These makeshift ambulances are not equipped with the necessary oxygen support system and other facilities to take care of patients in critical condition. Yet, these so-called ambulances are what the patients had to rely on.

The ambulance story does indicate that the DMCH was, and still is, a happy hunting ground for outsiders. They control admission of patients, allocation of beds and also the ambulance service. It is not known why the hospital authorities allowed the middlemen and outsiders to have such a dominant role.

Introduction of ambulance service, though on a very limited scale, should bring about a positive change at the DMCH in some of its basic services. However, we believe the hospital authorities will go beyond mere symbolism and upgrade the ambulance service to a level where the patients will be truly benefited.

Paid and unpaid

Women and work, traditionally, culturally, regionally and historically, have remained inseparable -- women have always worked and continue to work, whether paid or unpaid. Yet, in almost every country, there exists blatant disparity in payments, working conditions and hours between men and women workforces.



HABIBA TASNEEM CHOWDHURY

AS the world marks International Women's Day and eulogises women and womanhood, we need to revisit the apparent advances made to diminish gender disparity and its actualisation. This calls for a clear understanding of the progress made towards women's socio-economic emancipation in the context of their work related to economy and development and the opportunities available to them.

The turning point of the 20th century was the false dichotomy between women and work that became a socio-economic paradox of evolving theories and practices. Traditional structures of subsistence were based on physical work that was directly related to survival. Members of the family and community worked together. The role of men was as provider of sustenance and women were restricted to their primary role of mother. Gender differential gradually evolved from this fundamental conceptualisation of working spheres for women and men.

This scenario changed with the advent of the industrial age. Work place shifted from farm to factories. Work denominator shifted from immediate needs based production and exchange of goods to monetised value system. Men started working outside their homestead in exchange of money, while women continued working within the household. Society metamorphosed from goods to money based economy where women were sidelined as their

work was not considered "economic."

This micro trend blending into a macro system evaluated work on monetary purchase capacity. Women's work further diminished in value when there was no means of gauging their labour in terms of payment and eventually the purchase freedom that resulted from it as compared to men receiving payment for their work.

The new process enhanced the economic gender bias based on the perception that men earn while women have no contributions towards the monetary growth of the family.

The industrial revolution, and the two great wars, radically altered the situation. Women were catapulted into mainstream workforce. They became substitute workforce at the industrial, agricultural and other production and service levels, including the armed services, and simultaneously continued their primary domestic work.

Once the war ended most of the positions were given back to men. But women did not leave the mainstream workforce because the wars had considerably depleted the male population and caused economic recession. The situation forced women to take up the role of the primary bread earner, although their work was considered as supplementary income.

Women and work, traditionally, culturally, regionally and historically, have remained inseparable -- women have always worked and continue to work, whether paid or unpaid. Yet, in almost every country, there exists blatant disparity

in payments, working conditions and hours between men and women workforces. While women make up nearly 40 percent of the global paid workforce, they earn only 26 percent of the world's income as the bulk of their work remains in the unpaid sector and within the informal setting, excluding them from human resource development strategies.

Linkages between paid and unpaid, formal and informal work are mostly vague although their impact is significant in terms of major changes in urban-rural migration patterns, changing family structures, efficiency in the export oriented manufacturing sector and on individuals themselves and their ability to sustain voluntary commitments. Hence "women and work" paradigm is layered with dynamics that are characteristically distinct from each other.

But these are yet to be distinguished as essential features for lessening the challenges that women face in their respective positions and its overall economic impact on the public sector and human development index. Consequently, much of the labour done by women at the unpaid, informal and voluntary levels is lost in the economic activities and national accounts. This difference leads to lower entitlements to women than to men.

Globally, the gender gap in wages is hard to determine due to lack of comprehensive data. In the industrial and services sectors, the gap ranges between 53 percent and 97 percent with an average of 78 percent.

The differences in the work patterns of men and women and the "invisibility" of work that is not included in GNP lead to women's lower access to resources and opportunities, resulting in the lack of attention in macro-economic policy that adds to the inequity and perpetuates gender gaps.

Market globalisation and export oriented economic growth has resulted in the decline of single earning household. The process necessitates the expansion of informal and supplementary sectors to meet the ever-increasing demand for labour intensive products. The wheel of fortune at this juncture comes full circle as women are considered cheap labour and are progressively found in pink-collar jobs because of their lack of skills, training and education, hence raising the job ghettos that exist in every country.

The concept of "globalisation" is fundamentally based on economic expansion through breaking trade barriers. Today, it has developed into a global economic village and some Asian countries have created Export Processing Zones (EPZ) to house facilities that produce goods for export.

Because of the nature of the work in most of these EPZs, for example, vegetable packers in Mexico, garment workers in China and Bangladesh, cotton harvesters in Egypt, women's nimble fingers are in high demand. Therefore, women make up

much of the workforce in these areas and production zones. However, to attract foreign investors regulations and labour protection laws are either relaxed or not enforced for this sector, where the industries are characterised by low wages, long work hours, poor working conditions, lack of safety standards and barriers to workers' organisations, consequently affecting the women workers most.

Economic globalisation looks for optimal benefits for the supplier and the consumer. But, as the buyers predominantly happens to be from the "developed" region, the process facilitates maximum benefit for them, which translates into cost cutting, the burden of which is transferred on to the supplier -- eventually impacting the women workforce.

Economic globalisation has subjected women to the even harsher reality of coping with paid and unpaid work. Women work at a wide variety of occupations around the world as non-skilled and skilled labourers, professionals, self-employed and care givers. They make tremendous contributions to the economy through paid work. Most of the developing economies are at the threshold of massive emancipation yet progress is on hold, as women's unpaid work remains largely unrecognised in the GNP sector. Therefore, women's paid work is generally valued as less important than men's.

Consequently, women find themselves in non-standard jobs. Reduction of public service in progressive economies and lack of it in developing countries affects women's unpaid work as they must continue in their care-giving roles and also improvise to feed their families when money becomes scarce.

Paid and unpaid work is becoming more interwoven as the dominance of the breadwinner model gradually declines. Hence, socio-economic policy needs to take cognisance of this dimension to ensure that the unpaid work is taken into account.

It imperative that all countries should articulate and substantively address the issues, factors and demands of women at work in all the relevant settings and sectors, be it paid or unpaid. Intra and inter government level policy changes are needed to comprehensively deal with the deteriorating situation of women workforce globally, especially in the context of worldwide economic downturn.

The abovementioned situation analysis makes us aware through visible evidence that there is every reason to count unpaid work as tangible GNP for only then can the socio-economic gender disparity be sufficiently and effectively addressed and "Equal Rights, Equal opportunities: Progress for all" move from rhetoric to result based action for change in the status quo.

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Let women's voices be heard

Women's issues are a critical component of the most urgent transnational problems we face today, and they should be on the agenda of everyone, men and women, from the grassroots to the policymaking levels, in political life and beyond.

JAMES F. MORIARTY

MARCH 8 is International Women's Day. This year, it also marks the 15th anniversary of the United Nations Fourth World Conference on Women, held in Beijing. Fifteen years ago, 189 countries signed on to a Platform for Action that affirmed the need to work for women's equality in access to education, healthcare, jobs, credit, and more. It stressed the need to have women participate fully in the economic and political life of their countries, and to protect women's right to live free from violence. It was at this conference that then First Lady Hillary Rodham Clinton declared: Human rights are women's rights, and women's rights are human rights.

In the spirit of that conference, the United States has been working to integrate "women's issues" into mainstream foreign policy. We recognise that it is a human rights issue when mass sexual violence is used as a tool of war in the ongoing conflict in the Democratic Republic of the Congo. It is a human rights issue when women are excluded from the peace negotiations that affect their lives. And it is a human rights issue when women and girls are held like chattel by human traffickers and when girls are forced into child marriages.

Women's rights are human rights, and women's issues are human issues. They cut across traditional spheres of concern, and they are central, not peripheral. They are international development issues: Study upon study has shown that aid given to women is reinvested in their communities, and skills-development programs turn women into drivers of economic growth. And they are peace and security issues: When women are targeted in conflicts around the world, societies fray and desta-

bilise; the places that most exclude women from public life and seek to constrain their lives are the same in which extremist ideology finds a receptive home. The status of women is a bellwether for the political and economic health of nations.

Women's issues are a critical component of the most urgent transnational problems we face today, and they should be on the agenda of everyone, men and women, from the grassroots to the policymaking levels, in political life and beyond. Violence against women is endemic around the world. Ending it requires everyone's participation, including an active and vocal role for men and for religious leaders of both sexes.

The United States is supporting programs around the globe in order that their voices will be heard. Here in Bangladesh, the U.S. government, through USAID, provides income opportunities for thousands of women across several sectors. U.S. government-funded local government initiatives empower women at the grass roots level to help local government leaders develop effective budgets and ensure accountability throughout the process. The United States government also funds programs in Bangladesh's protected forests that provide women with important roles in safeguarding these important natural resource areas.

Despite the pledge made in 1995 by so many countries to end the discrimination that robs the world of the talent it desperately needs, women are still the majority of the world's poor, unhealthy, underfed, and uneducated. To the silent majority around the globe that supports women's equality, we say: The time to translate support into action is now.

We look forward to the time when International Women's Day will be a histor-



Is anybody listening?

ical and retrospective celebration of women's path to the achievement of equality -- when every day belongs equally to women and to men, and every day is a good

day for human rights.
His Excellency James F. Moriarty is U.S. Ambassador to Bangladesh.