

Empowering women for development

More children are now going to school but the enrolment of girls remain poor, at about 10 percent compared to 23 percent for boys. Government during all these years attempted to get certain percentage of population onto schools but did little else.

MD. ASADULLAH KHAN

WHILE the nation celebrated the 100th International Women's Day, the stark reality is that the status of women has not substantially changed for the better even after an appraisal of the fact that empowering women, meaning redistributing power from men to women, can ensure more balanced development. Gender inequalities in access to resources and opportunities negate the concept of human development and the spirit of democracy. Empowerment that would have given the vast majority of women the choice and self-development is missing. Reports on women's work and their plight suggest that poverty and deeply etched social attitudes have produced a kind of hidden upheaval in the country's female population. Though women constitute more than half of the population, hardly any meaningful effort has been taken to enable them to participate in political, socio-cultural and economic life equally with men.

Social injustice and economic exploitation of the girl child could only be tackled through motivation, policy guidelines and bold leadership at the government level. Women seem to be discriminated against in the society in ever greater proportions, the genesis of which can be traced to the apathy inherent in the male population of the sub-continent. Though

the Bangladesh constitution provides for equality between the sexes with proper protection for women and children, people are still governed by customs and rules that fail to give women their due.

Unfortunately, people have been watching during the last few years an unending feud between the leading political parties that has stifled all nation building activities and pragmatic planning. Till now, the energy, imagination, talent and potential of our young men and women could not be fruitfully channelised to take the country forward. The edifice of a prosperous society could be built with firm commitment and policies towards halting the trafficking of women for forced labour, domestic servitude and sex exploitation. Because, when women are guaranteed basic human and labour rights, the whole family and the community benefit. When women gain the knowledge and power to make their own choices, society is better able to break the chains of poverty.

Despite growing consensus on the importance of women's work, gender disparities and inequality of opportunity and treatment persist. Too many women are denied the right to go to school, or to take a job for which they receive equal pay. Too many women are concentrated in the informal work sector. Scores are barred from access to loans or credit, or from exercising the most basic legal rights. That means when the male mem-



It is only woes without empowerment.

ber in a family dies or becomes disabled, the family lands in a sea of calamity and distress.

Against the backdrop of such a bleak scenario that cripples development, women are the most neglected and tortured. The poignant picture that comes to mind is that of something killing or neglecting the girls and young women. The single culprit is the dowry system, which makes a daughter a family burden and a son, who collects the dowry, an asset. For many, dowry is a social malady that makes their lives extremely miserable.

Even in a country where abuse and neglect are facts of life for many women, acid attacks are alarming for their frequency. Incidents of acid attacks have been reported from all corners of the country among practically every economic class. The reasons range from property feuds to sexual advances to

rejected marriage proposal. Speaking in general, although the acid victims usually identify their molesters, whose guilt can then be established with certainty, many women find court appearance traumatic. Women's rights activists have rightly said: "We keep making new laws, but wherever we go, we just see violence and more violence against women."

For women, it is a difficult battle to win. They are handicapped by history, victims of a firmly embedded gender system. Still some women -- though a minority -- are fighting back. More aware, better educated and exposed to a liberal culture, they refuse to be conveniently fitted into stereotyped roles. It is an impressive defiance but it comes at a cost.

Because of orthodox or conservative notions that keep women away from any constructive or meritorious work, the picture in Bangladesh is now pretty dis-

mal. Although Bangladesh has a male-female ratio of 96:100, women have been neglected in the society. The majority of petty construction workers are women. These hapless women, some with babies on their backs, haul bricks on their heads to soaring heights in the numerous buildings under construction. Female workers, despite the fact that they work for longer hours and with all seriousness, are given lesser wages than their male counterparts for the same work.

The neglect in educating girls is doubly alarming because education leads to a drop in infant mortality and a reduced birthrate. The Indian state of Kerala has a per capita income of only \$156 but the literacy level is an impressive 90 percent. Because of the high literacy this state has been able to solve many problems that seem so intractable elsewhere in the sub-continent.

The dropout situation of girls in the country is appallingly bad. According to a government statistics made public in December 2008, 36 percent of the girls dropout before reaching class eight, and the dropout rate in between class nine and ten is 73 percent. Without a shadow of doubt, the country suffers inexorably because of its flawed and discriminatory education system.

While we talk about improving the economic condition of the people, we tend to forget that this can only be realised if the political climate improves. The stability that people look for in the days to come might unleash the entrepreneurial drive in the country, not only for men but women as well. The literacy rate, meaning not the mere knowledge of three R's but signifying a level of quality education, is an indicator of the progress the country can achieve. If education is a means to learn skills and transform lives, then a sub-

standard education is of no use.

In Bangladesh, remarkable changes have come about in recent years. Primary education is compulsory. More children are now going to school but the enrolment of girls remain poor, at about 10 percent compared to 23 percent for boys. Government during all these years attempted to get certain percentage of population onto schools but did little else. Other than the extreme poverty situation that stands in the way to women's emancipation, parents in the rural areas consider it a priority option to marry their daughters off to prospective candidates in the village in the early years of their adulthood.

Moreover, other than the financial problems, the insecurity involved in keeping the girls onto schools and colleges as they grow up because of social vices in the form of harassment, lewd comments, teasing and even gang-rape discourage the parents to allow their daughters to schools and colleges for education. Subjected to teasing by village hoodlums day in and day out, as The Daily Star report on March 10 indicated, Reshma, daughter of a poor rickshaw puller Abdul Jalil and a student of Sherpur Technical school and college ended her life by taking pesticide on March 2. How can poor parents in rural areas muster strength and courage to send their daughters to schools and colleges when such social vices like teasing, acid throwing, abduction and even incidents of rape go unabated?

Pathetically true, despite existence of laws and stringent penalties, social attitude towards women's status seem to permit these social aberrations.

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Women reservations can wait

It is welcome to see the nemesis catching up with Gujarat Chief Minister Narendra Modi. This is also a slap in the face of leading industrialists, who gathered at Ahmedabad some weeks ago to announce that the next prime minister of India should be Modi. Money bags have a limited say.

KULDIP NAYAR

JIHAD has different meanings. Islamist terrorists have one. Leaders of other backward classes (OBC) in India have another. The latter have used the word jihad to raise the standard of revolt against the government headed by Prime Minister Manmohan Singh. His Congress party had the Rajya Sabha, the upper house of Parliament, endorse the controversial Women's Reservation Bill.

The OBC, a caste between the upper castes and the lowest castes, fear that the 33 percent reservations in the two houses of Parliament and the state legislatures would benefit primarily the elite and the affluent (today 68 percent of woman MPs are crorepatris) and leave their womenfolk still more backward. Many male MPs of different parties are also having second thoughts.

The bill, when enacted, will curtail 181 seats of men from 545-member Lok Sabha, the lower house. It is laid down that after every general election -- the tenure is five years -- reservations for women will rotate to embrace new constituencies. The process, covering the entire country, will end after 15 years when the reservation period ends.

The three OBC leaders who are leading the agitation are Mulayam Singh Yadav from UP, Lalu Prasad Yadav from Bihar and Sharad Yadav, president of the Janata Dal (United). They have threatened not to allow the government to function if their castes were not accommodated. Their apprehension is somewhat exaggerated. Yet, they have a point when they argue that reservations may work against the women from their castes and the minorities.

The remedy they suggest is, however, worse than the disease. They demand a quota within quota, 10 percent for the OBC and five percent for Muslims. This proposal may evoke a feeling of separation in the country, which gets easily divided on caste or creed.

There is no doubt that the legislation fulfils the call by parliamentary democracy to have gender equality. The question which needs to be asked is: Was it necessary to take such a step when the country was plagued by numerous problems, from Maoists' violence, rising prices to dismal poverty? True, the bill has been languishing for 14 years. But no span of time is long enough when the alternative is a cleavage in society and tension in the country.

India has not yet developed into a polity where the differences over caste or religion have been even allayed, much less settled. Indeed, it is tough for a liberal or a democrat to ignore what the modern world achieved long ago. Yet, a nation has to define its own priorities. I do not think that the bill should have been on top of the agenda when the consensus was lacking.

Prosperity and pluralism may one day make the exploitation in the name of caste and creed irrelevant. Till such time, the leaders have to resist the temptation to hit headlines because the gain of a few may spell ruin to the millions. The credit, which is given rightly to Congress President Sonia Gandhi, may look small in the face of dangers that the nation would be exposed to.

Unfortunately, all the three OBC leaders, driven to the wall on the mathematics of numbers in Parliament, have played the card of caste. They are trying to re-ignite the fire that was quenched some 20 years ago by implementing the Mandal Commission report and giving reservations to OBC. Still, the country remained on the boil till the report was implemented. A similar situation can take place if the women's bill is sought to be passed as it has emerged from the Rajya Sabha. Hamlets and neighbourhoods would become a warfront, as it happened during the Mandal report agitation. OBC leader Lalu Prasad has already said that the bill can only be passed over his dead body.

A better suggestion is that political parties should be legally bound to allo-

cate 33 percent seats to women in parliament and the state legislatures. I am told that all parties except the Left are agreeable to the proposal. Why the communists are against it is not understandable, but their dialectical materialism goes on a different tangent. Another suggestion Bihar Chief Minister Nitish Kumar has given is that the 33 percent seats can be converted into dual constituencies so as to accommodate women.

There is no option to conciliation. The Congress, which has 208 seats in the Lok Sabha -- 65 short of a majority -- cannot afford to alienate the Yadavs because their support is crucial to the government's viability. The Congress has, perforce, assured Parliament that all the parties would be consulted before proceeding further on the bill. The party should not be in hurry. In any case, it has already announced that it would bring the bill after the budget was passed. The ugly scene witnessed in the Rajya Sabha, resulting in the physical ouster of seven members, brought parliamentary democracy to the level of mobocracy. It can be worse if the bill in its present shape is pursued.

The demolition of the Babri masjid was the fallout of the Mandal agitation. BJP leader Atal Behari Vajpayee admitted after the demolition that if the Mandal had not taken place, "we would not have picked up kamandal (a vessel used by hermits)." The nation is still paying for the sins committed at that time. Must we add to our miseries?

It is welcome to see the nemesis catching up with Gujarat Chief Minister



Protesting reservation.

Narendra Modi. This is also a slap in the face of leading industrialists, who gathered at Ahmedabad some weeks ago to announce that the next prime minister of India should be Modi. The corporate sector should realise that the people elect a ruling party, which in turn appoints the prime minister. Money bags have a limited say. What Modi did was to spread extremism, which the industrialists should know is an anti-thesis of development.

Modi has at last been summoned by the Special Investigation Team (SIT) on the basis of a complaint filed both by the wife and the son of former Congress MP Eshan Jaffrey. He rang up everyone,

including Modi, for help when Eshan's house was surrounded by the rioters during the Gujarat carnage. No help reached him until all 69 of them were butchered and the house burnt. Was it deliberate? The SIT will tell us soon.

The SIT was appointed by the Supreme Court to inquire into 10 cases relating to the murder of Muslims in the Gujarat pogrom in 2002. The report may not set every wrong right. Yet, it is expected to name the guilty. Families of the victims have been waiting for the last eight years to see that those whose hands are soaked with blood do not go unpunished.

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For a sustainable teacher development

A mentor helps the teacher like a good colleague, with friendly guidance and support through cooperative and collaborative activities in and outside the classroom to make her teaching useful, interesting and outcome-oriented, so that learning becomes enjoyable and effective.

M. SHAMSUL HOQUE

IMPROVING the quality of primary education largely depends on improving the teaching and learning in the classroom. And to facilitate improved teaching-learning in the classroom, a crucial factor is to ensure that effective teachers are engaged in teaching. But it is hard to come by such teachers in our socio-economic context. In the circumstances, the single most important factor is to establish a teacher development system to properly train the teachers, upgrade their knowledge and teaching skills and bring about an attitude change in them, so that they can improve their classroom teaching permanently.

The existing training system, no doubt, helps teachers with acquiring relevant subject-knowledge and teaching skills. They also demonstrate their teaching skills in simulation/teaching-practice sessions during their training period. The trainee teachers put a lot of time and effort into making these skills-practice demonstrations highly impressive to their trainers/supervisors (though mainly to get a good grade in the examination).

However, almost invariably this training-time quality performance of the teachers just gets lost after the training is over. Back to their schools, they usually relapse into their old take-it-easy way of teaching, i.e. through teacher-centred, non-interactive activities like lecturing,



To make learning enjoyable and effective.

explaining texts, words and meaning, translating into Bangla if the subject is English, etc.

The reason why the teachers behave differently (i.e. one way during their training and another way after their training) is that their classroom teaching

is not properly monitored and there is no mentoring and peer support service in our teacher development system. So the teachers are hardly accountable to anybody for not using the new teaching skills on a regular basis. Also, without any attitudinal change in them, which

hardly happens during the training, they are unlikely to be motivated to apply new knowledge and new skills in class to facilitate learning.

Now the crucial thing is to motivate, enable and empower teachers to keep up and build on the good teaching skills they acquired while they were training. This can be done by, among other things, integrating a built-in mechanism in the teacher development system. This will be a "mentoring mechanism." After the teachers receive appropriate training on effective teaching and supervision, mentoring them starts when they actually begin to teach in their own schools.

Mentoring a teacher is helping her over quite a long period of time to improve her classroom teaching through pedagogical as well as social support. Mentoring takes place in a non-threatening, non-authoritative environment in and outside the school. It should be de-linked with any administrative and power relations. A mentor helps the teacher like a good colleague, with friendly guidance and support through cooperative and collaborative activities in and outside the classroom to make her teaching useful, inter-

esting and outcome-oriented, so that learning becomes enjoyable and effective. Thus, mentoring can bring about a genuine, sustainable change in the teacher's personal as well as professional behaviour, thereby improving the quality of teaching and learning in our schools.

Mentoring is a recent development in teacher education. To see its benefits, many countries in the world, both developed and developing, have introduced it in their teacher development system. Mentoring has already started working in Uzbekistan, Nepal, Pakistan and a few other regional countries with the help of the British Council. In a very small way, last year we had a short mentor training program in Sylhet, also supported by the British Council. However, the program was only for the English teachers. Bangladesh needs mentoring its teachers for all school subjects, particularly English, Bangla, maths and science for improving the quality of teaching, thereby improving the quality of education.

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