

Concerted efforts needed

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RANJAN KARMAKER

ON November 25, 1960, Patria, Maria Teresa and Minerva Miravel, three sisters, were killed for their revolt against the then autocratic regime of Dominican Republic. Since 1981, this date has been observed as International Day to Protest Violence Against Women. In 1999, the UN declared this day as International Day to Eliminate Violence against Women. The UN also declared November 25 to December 10 as International Fortnight to Protest Violence against Women.

All over the world, this international fortnight is observed with huge significance. Steps Towards Development is also organising a series of campaign and advocacy programs to observe this fortnight, which is also popular as 16-Days of Activism. The aim of the campaign is to "build social and political movement to protest sexual harassment and all kinds of violence against women."

During the last few weeks, a number of tragic deaths have shocked the whole country. Whenever such incidents are reported in the media, people become agitated and there is a hue and cry for some time. But not too much of an effort is made with regard to solving the problem. As a result, we only try to somehow release our frustration and anger. However, despite the sad end to the lives of many girls, eve teasing, or sexual harassment, has not been incorporated

as a criminal or terrorist activity in the laws of the country.

In order to avoid the problem, many parents opt to marry off their daughters at an early age. As a consequence, many girls are forced to discontinue their education and immerse themselves in domestic life.

Eve teasing or sexual harassment is not new in our society. "It's not too bad, just an excited expression of adolescence," some people often say lightly. However, they are not conscious enough about the negative consequences of such harassment. It creates obstacles in healthy and normal development of girls. They suffer from inferiority complex and lack of self-confidence. For fear of social stigma or because of shyness, girls used to keep silent about such offences. They go through terrible mental trauma, which sometimes becomes so unbearable that some of the girls are forced to commit suicide. They hardly get support from their families.

In recent years, social awareness against eve teasing has increased to some extent. Steps Towards Development, Bangladesh Mahila Parishad, Bangladesh Women Lawyers' Association and some other women's rights organisations have been protesting against sexual harassment on the streets, in the workplaces and educational institutions and in other public and private spheres. They carried out rallies and organised human chains, opinion surveys, and sensitisation

programmes to publicise the ill effects of this grisly human rights violation.

As a result of these initiatives, people have started to break the silence. A realisation is growing among the people that eve teasing is a crime and a violation of women's human rights. But when some people come forward to protest, the perpetrators become violent.

We think that the government has to enact strict laws with proper implementation to combat eve teasing. At the same time, we also think that a strong united social movement has to be built up. Political commitment, however, should not be ignored in this context. Those who harass the girls and women on the streets, markets, and other places should be treated as terrorists/criminals and given exemplary punishment. They must be given the message that they cannot carry out their nefarious activities with impunity. No political or family influence should be able to rescue the offenders. And this conviction has to be spread out among the common people.

The police have to be more responsible and sensible about taking cases against the criminals without delay. Side by side, families need to teach their children ethical and moral lessons. Positive social norms and values should be restored. Respect has to be bestowed on women as mothers or daughters.

Sports, cultural activities and libraries should be expanded for progressive cultural movement. That will help our boys to avoid harmful activities and be busy with constructive activities. To combat eve teasing, there should be a social protection net comprised of teachers, guardians, elected representatives, civil society members and various professional groups. Strict law and its effective enforcement along with collective social protest can heal the social disease.

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Eliminating violence against women

Violence against women is one of the most pervasive problems affecting women's dignity, self-esteem, and psychological and physical health. Women are often ignorant of their rights because of illiteracy, less access to economic opportunities, and strong social stigma.



MAHMUDA HUSAIN

NOVEMBER 25 is observed as *Antorjatic Nari Nirjaton Protirodh Dibash*. Violence against women is the barrier on the way to achieving equality of men and women all over the world.

Violence against women is a major human rights issue. At least one-fifth of the world's female population have been physically or sexually abused by a man at some time in their life. Violence against women is an enormous global problem that will take massive global action to solve.

Supremacy of males is an age-old and deep-rooted concept, and cannot be done away with overnight. The very threatening notion that men are superior in terms of power and are rightful custodians of women, as well as quite incapable of surviving alone, is an important and influential social factor.

Women, irrespective of class, face problems of early marriage, dowry and for the most part, devotion to the sole interest (dignity, security and overall comfort) of the family, as viewed from the prism of male predominance.

There should be a congenial atmosphere where a woman, being an equal partner of a man, can have a peaceful and harmonious relationship with her male counterpart. A secure, prosperous and happy family life is keenly desired for the sake of the generations yet to come, so that a sound and healthy society, nay a strong nation, can be built. On the whole, the goal is to achieve a peaceful but dynamic life for

women.

Women are vulnerable to domestic and non-domestic violence. In our society, a majority of women in the rural areas believe that a husband generally has the right to hit his wife.

Sexual crimes are seen as dishonour for the victim of the crime and not for the offender. The penal code does not include domestic violence. Thus, even life-threatening cases of domestic violence may not be filed by the police, and will remain private.

Violence against women is one of the most pervasive problems affecting women's dignity, self-esteem, and psychological and physical health. Women are often ignorant of their rights because of illiteracy, less access to economic opportunities, and strong social stigma.

Many NGOs operate programmes to raise awareness of women's rights, and to encourage and assist them in exercising those rights. The government has taken up multi-sectoral programmes to reduce violence against women.

Prevention and elimination of violence against women from the society is a formidable challenge. Combating such challenges is possible if comprehensive analysis of the causes and factors of violence is undertaken.

Domestic violence is caused primarily by the husbands and mothers-in-law, mainly due to delay in the payment of dowry. In our society, where the giving of dowry is practiced, the custom can be fatal for women whose parents are unable to meet demands for

gifts or money. Violence that begins with threats may end in suicide or death from injuries, or even homicide.

Recommendations to prevent violence against women:

- A participatory social mobilisation campaign may be launched together by the government NGOs and the private sector. The planned actions to eradicate violence against women need to be integrated with national plans of development, especially in the poverty reduction strategies. The private sector may extend assistance to build social capital, particularly as a safety net for the victims in the poor families, so that they can seek justice, medical care and rehabilitation services;
 - Future reformatory action by the government would need to be focused on achieving more intensive and concerted participation of both the police and the courts so that they too can contribute towards eradicating the social evil of violence against women. Male partners should be sensitised to raise their awareness of the adverse consequences of violence against women;
 - In Bangladesh, specially in the rural societies, religious leaders (*imams, kazis, mattobars*) play an important role as local arbitrators (*gram shalish*) and give *fatwas* for inflicting punishment (*stoning, dorras, social ostracisation*), particularly against women. Changing the attitudes and orientation of these people needs involvement of the local government;
 - Where necessary, existing laws relating to violence against women must be amended and implemented in the light of the Beijing Conference;
 - Withdrawal of the reservation of CEDAW Articles 2 & 16.c. for the elimination of all forms of discrimination against women;
 - The law enforcing agencies and the local governments need to be more proactive and positively sensitive towards cases of violence against women so that timely actions are taken against the perpetrators.
- To eradicate violence from the society, emphasis should be given on the empowerment of women, and on ensuring a secure and progressively dynamic life for them. Women no longer have to become victims of heinous crimes.

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Food import: For whom?

There are basically two motives for food grain procurement by the state -- to provide food security to the vulnerable population and to smooth out food grain price fluctuation from year to year. So, there are plenty of things to be considered before taking any decision concerning agriculture and food grain as the entire population is affected by it.

M. MIZANUR RAHMAN and SHAMMUNUL ISLAM

RECENTLY, the government took a decision not to buy rice from the farmers but to import it from abroad. The reason given is that rice price is already high in the market. The decision is as simple as it looks. Agricultural price policy is very crucial for a country as 60% of the population depend directly on agriculture.

Stabilising food grain market is important for any government for many reasons, of which the two main ones are (i) if the farmers do not get the proper price, they will lose their incentive for agricultural production next year and (ii) if the food grain price is too high, the industrial sector will have to lose their profit as higher price tends to bring an increase in wages. Both of these two situations can be disastrous for our country.

Considering the interests of both the farmers and the industrialists is equally important. If the government cannot give proper price to the farmers for their food grains, they may even move to the cash crops and the food security of our country will be threatened. In the northern part and in the hill tracts many farmers have

turned to cultivating tobacco, and in the southern part they have taken up shrimp farming, which is not a good signal for our country.

A study shows that by 2050, 17% of the South Asian people will suffer food crisis, and by 2100 the number will rise to 35% (Basak, 2010). The World Bank estimates that 882 million people in developing countries are facing food insecurity in 2010. This is alarming indeed for all of us, and ensuring food security should be of utmost importance for the government as there is distressing increase of population as well as demand for food.

To keep the farmers in the agricultural production system the government usually follows either of two major policies -- price support or input subsidy. In developing countries like Bangladesh, both policies are often adopted. The government has allocated Tk.4,006 crore for agricultural input subsidy (in the last FY, it was Tk.4,200 crore). This was done so that the input cost remained low and rice price in the market could cover or exceed the input cost. But, because of the weak distribution system and dealership management, and corruption at every stage, farmers cannot reap the benefit.

Along with input subsidy, the government buys rice from the farmers directly at an assured price. It keeps the food grain market stable as the government fixes the floor price of the food grains. This system can easily help in ensuring fair price for the farmers.

Now let us look at what will happen because of the decision of not buying rice from the farmers, and see how logical it is.

First of all, we have to bear in mind that rice price in any market in the country and the price received by the farmers are not the same. Last year, farmers got a maximum of Tk.600 for a maund of rice, but in the market we got prepared rice of the same amount (25 kg of prepared rice is produced from one maund of rice) almost Tk.1,000. Almost Tk.600 goes into the pockets of the middlemen who buy rice from the field, prepare it, transport it and sell it in the market.

This new type of business emerged in the villages only one and half decades ago, and now it is rising fast. It is the middlemen not the farmers who are earning a huge amount of money from food grains. So high price in the market does not indicate that farmers are getting the right price.

The government has 8 lakh metric tonnes of food grains in stock, and has decided to import another eight lakh metric tonnes from abroad. This will increase the profit of the middlemen. There is no farmers' union in any locality of our country, but middlemen can dictate the terms by creating a union among themselves. When the government is not the buyer, these businessmen will easily control the market and it will be the farmers who will lose out again. This, in turn, will discourage them from producing



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food grains next year. In India, inflation in food price was 20% in FY 2009-10. Even then, Haryana Chief Minister Bhupinder Singh Hooda urged the central government to peg the minimum support price of food grains at 50% higher than the actual cost of cultivation. But, Bangladesh, with a food inflation of 9.72% (as of September, 2010), is thinking of not buying rice, which raises

the question as to why we should take away price support when it has the potential of becoming a boon for our agricultural sector.

In creating a better food grain policy it is imperative to look at the entire system of food production, food procurement and the release and distribution of food. There are basically two motives for food grain procurement by the state -- to pro-

vide food security to the vulnerable population and to smooth out food grain price fluctuation from year to year. So, there are plenty of things to be considered before taking any decision concerning agriculture and food grain as the entire population is affected by it.

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