

Expectation from International Women's Day

MAMUNUR RASHID

MARCH 8 commemorates another celebration of International Women's Day. On this day, people and countries across the world unite with one voice, one common demand, and that is to establish equal rights of women. It reminds us that the world is still not a safe place for everybody and that women are at the rear seat of social and economic development. Most importantly, this day reminds us that the movement that started a hundred years ago has relevance even today.

How far have we actually travelled since then? To find an answer, let's look at this year's theme of the International Women's Day, "Equal access to education, training, and science and technology: Pathway to decent work for women." The very selection of such a theme indicates that women are not getting equal access to education, training and science and technology, which are the major areas in terms of human development.

The fact that women have been kept restricted behind the domestic veil is still a matter of concern for countries with poor and moderate economies. Why? On the one hand, the countries are missing out the valuable contribution of the womenfolk, which hampers sound national growth. On the other hand, women continue to be deprived of equal human rights in different aspects of life.

The incidents of violence against women, including sexual harassment, catch my attention through the news that appears in the media

and, needless to say, what I see in my own family and with the relatives and friends. When I look into this matter, I get not only frustrated but also frightened thinking about the future of my four-year old daughter. Is our society able to guarantee her a safe and just society which will allow her to grow freely and without any fear? The answer is a no.

But, because I am a social worker, I look at this issue from a rather different angle. Yes, women are not liberated enough. This is the 21st century and we are still not in a position to claim that all human beings are equal and therefore entitled to be equally treated in the family, society and institutions. Here, the term "equal" does not necessarily imply equality in terms of size or how one looks, but equality in dignity or respect as human beings.

I identify one common reason behind all this -- women are considered as the second sex. Patriarchy, which has been the dominating idea when it comes to gender, still exists in large scale in all aspects of the social, political and state system. The good thing is there are various efforts to change the situation.

As a growing vibrant society, Bangladesh is trying to comply with various international norms and standards to ensure women's human rights. The Bangladesh government has signed international conventions and treaties recognising the need to establish women's equal rights and status. UN CEDAW Convention and Beijing Platform for



major challenges of the implementation of

WAP is lack of political will. Different political parties have different motives. With more than two years in office, the current government has expressed willingness to reinstate the Women's Advancement Policy 1997. But unfortunately no visible actions have been taken so far.

Although the government has taken a number of positive legal and policy initiatives to establish women's rights and combat violence against women, we are still waiting to see that policy in place. In doing so, we hope that the recent perspectives, including new developments and emerging issues, will be duly considered. A sound and time-appropriate policy is essential, and it should provide clear guidelines and directions with regard to taking more effective actions to establish women's equal rights and entitlements with men.

It's all about changing the attitude. If we want a change, we first need to recognise the need to change. We need to recognise that a democratic and just society can never be realised unless we free ourselves from the deep-rooted beliefs and practices that deny women equal respect and dignity as human beings. So we need to set up a benchmark of where we stand and where we want to reach. That benchmark can be the National Women's Advancement Policy 2011.

The writer is a human rights activist working at Steps Towards Development.

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Action are among them.

In line with the emphasis provided in these instruments, each country is obligated to formulate, implement and monitor Women's Advancement Policy, which is a global index of women's development. The govern-

ment declared Women's Advancement Policy (WAP) on March 4, 1997, which was a great achievement of the women and human rights movement in the country. The then government in power, Awami League, got credit for that.

However, we have seen subsequent governments changing a number of clauses, which has distorted the original spirit of the policy. Women and human rights activists protested against those unduly made changes. In fact, one of the

Adolescent girls: key to the MDGs?

TARA LEUNG

EDUCATION and vocational training for adolescent girls is crucial to making extreme poverty history in Bangladesh.

Bangladesh's next challenge Barack Obama has praised Bangladesh for progress on MDG 4 -- halving child mortality over the last 10 years -- but we must now face another challenge: helping each of these boys and girls grow through their crucial adolescent

Extreme-poor adolescent girls are vulnerable

The typical story of an adolescent girl from a poor family looks something like this: she is pulled out of school around age 11 to help around the house, her parents have already chosen a husband for her, and a marriage is arranged for her by age 16. She becomes pregnant soon after, and takes up the responsibility of caretaker of her children and her mother-in-law's house.

Girls who follow this pattern are

are twice as likely to die from child-birth, and girls 10-14 are five times more likely, according to a recent Unicef study. Adolescent mothers are also at 30-35% greater risk than older women of delivering pre-term or under-weight babies.

Bangladesh can do better

But life doesn't have to be this grim for adolescent girls. Girls who finish school are better prepared to find jobs, marry at a safe and healthy age, avoid abuse, and bring up healthy, educated children of

laboratory in Dhaka dedicated to eradicating cholera; another Bangladeshi woman works for a think tank abroad, tackling issues of international terrorism. There are also thousands of Bangladeshi mothers who received the kind of education and support necessary to stay healthy and raise healthy children. Bangladeshi women, when educated and supported, are an incredible force against poverty.

We have what it takes

Women in Bangladesh make great contributions to household incomes, learning, leadership, and development toward the MDGs, but releasing this potential takes effort from all of us. It takes households valuing the long-term benefits of sending adolescent girls to school more than the immediate economic benefits of arranging her early marriage; it takes mothers and fathers, brothers and young men letting young women make decisions about their bodies and their lives. And it takes young women to answer the challenge to contribute their skills and their voices to move forward.

Releasing girls' potential also takes organisations and community leaders who are willing to invest in girls on an equal level with boys. Businesses must take on girl apprentices, vocational training must be made available to both, and household members must be willing to fill the gap left by girls no longer working at home. The task is great, but the payoffs are immeasurable.

Show your support for the extreme poor and challenge NGOs, government, and civic leaders to take notice of extreme poor adolescent girls. Bangladesh's development depends on them.

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TANVIR AHMED

Death of a good man



Nury Vittachi

THE shaggy-haired intern who sat next to me at the newspaper seemed to be a weirdo. Shane Abrahams had no interest in any of the traditional after-work hobbies of male journalists (drinking, vomiting, falling over, being slapped by women, etc). When the rest of us hit the bars, he went "awol."

Later, someone told us his secret. Shane was a Nice Guy. After hours he did voluntary work at Vietnamese boat people refugee camps!

Shocked, we confronted Shane, explaining: "Journalists are self-obsessed egomaniacs. It's a time-honored tradition."

Shane nodded politely, and did the sensible thing, which was to ignore us.

That was 18 years ago. The rest of us achieved exactly what you'd expect, i.e., nothing at all. But Shane worked miracles, becoming a full-time refugee volunteer. We stayed friends.

Then last week I heard that Shane had died helping displaced people on the Thailand Myanmar border.

Suddenly thought of a million things that it was now too late to say to him. (1. "You were right, we were wrong." 2. "You rock, mate." 3. "Where's that pen you borrowed in 1993?" etc.)

"It's not too late," said a mutual friend, a guy who lives on Facebook 24 hours a day.

They ranged from serious to

funny. Gerry O'Kane wrote: "Good luck in your new adventure, mate." Cliff Hammer wrote: "I will always remember the times we spent together, even though you support Spurs."

The Facebook guy explained: "Many people's sites become more active after they die. Our bodies turn to dust and our gravestones crumble, but our Facebook pages live forever."

(One of the people in the room looked horrified at that -- I made a mental note to look up her Facebook photo files to find out why.)

Anyway, I learned that the social network site is really careful about deceased users these days, after a mistake in 2009 when it sent out automated emails urging people to use Facebook to "reconnect" with dead friends. "Would that I could," one angry user said in a Twitter message, using the tag "MassiveFacebookFail."

One of Shane's other friends said: "It's nice to feel that we can still send him messages. But what would be really amazing is if he could send us messages."

As yet there is no way of logging in from Heaven, but no doubt Facebook boss Mark Zuckerberg is working on it.

The next day, I went to my office and turned on my email. Huh? I couldn't believe it. There was an email from Shane! This is not a joke. In a message forwarded by a service called Linked-in, he wrote: "I'd like to add you to my professional network."

I clicked: Yes. A message flashed up on the screen: "You are now connected to Shane Abrahams."

I sent him a message: "To Shane, New Arrivals Dept, Highest Heaven. I see you decided to go home. We miss you. Rest in peace. And you can keep the pen."

To know more, visit our columnist at www.vittachi.com

Businesses must take on girl apprentices, vocational training must be made available to both, and household members must be willing to fill the gap left by girls no longer working at home.

years to become healthy, productive adults. Unfortunately, Bangladeshi girls do not receive the kind of support during these years that they need. If that continues to be the case, Bangladesh will miss out on their potential contribution to national development, and achieving the rest of the MDGs.

vulnerable to many risks. A recent report by the International Center for Research on Women found that "...girls who married before age 18 were twice as likely to report being beaten, slapped, or threatened by their husbands as were girls who married later." Compared to girls aged 20 and over, girls aged 15-19

their own, perpetuating societal and economic growth. Bangladesh is full of examples: educated, influential women who have been given the chance to live up to their potential.

Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina is a perfect example. A woman scientist I know runs a world-renowned