

Every mother counts

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It is very late at night in early 2001. Fifteen year old Mitali [Note: *] lies writhing in pain in the corner of a dingy room deep within one of Dhaka's overcrowded slums. She is several hours into labour. Her adolescent body, emaciated from chronic malnourishment, is not the optimal environment to sufficiently host or deliver a baby.

Alone in the tiny room she shares with her husband, unattended by family let alone a skilled attendant, Mitali finally gives birth -- to a stillborn infant/fetus? She herself narrowly escapes death, only to be subjected to three more pregnancies over the next ten years and the loss of yet another child to pneumonia. In the ten years since Mitali's first pregnancy, Bangladesh has come a long way towards protecting its mothers. It has been successful in reducing the maternal mortality ratio (MMR) from 322 per 100,000 live births in 2001 to 194 by 2010. And yet, women like Mitali continue to endure the terrifying "near miss" experience unnecessarily to this day.

Married off too early, girls and women have very little say in decisions related to family planning, pregnancy and reproductive health care, even though they are the ones who experience complicated, painful and often fatal pregnancies and deliveries. And even so, as there is room to celebrate a 40% reduction, there is still critical work to be done through a nationwide scale up of services.

A large part of the problem is a serious shortage in skilled human resources, as are issues such as inflexible operating hours for public medical facilities, inadequate supplies of medicines, diagnostic facilities, hospital beds and donor blood. All this, coupled with the lack of privacy and basic hygiene at these facilities and the neglect or disdain of its administrators, have prompted over 80% of the population to seek healthcare from informal providers. For a majority of Bangladeshi women, this means little or no prenatal check ups to identify possible complications and ultimately, home deliveries in unhygienic settings, alone or with the aid of female relatives or neighbors accustomed to unsafe birth practices that risk the lives of both mother and child.

Over 7,000 women in Bangladesh die every year as a result. What makes this statistic so tragic, and unjust, is the fact that most of these deaths are preventable -- the 40% decline over the last decade in Bangladesh's MMR is irrefutable proof. This decline has been largely due to reduction in fertility rate (from 3.2 to 2.5), improvement in access to emergency obstetric care in hospital settings (from 9% to 23%), increase in female education (literacy rate

among women 18-24 years of age is 80%) and, most importantly, an overall increase in women's empowerment.

The empowerment of women has manifold repercussions on maternal and child health. Given the right kind of information and access to care, women are able to make better choices about when their bodies are at a safe age for conception, family planning, birth spacing, prenatal care, delivery and postnatal care. She is also then in a position to make better informed decisions about her child's



LITON RAHMAN/ DRINKNEWS

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health care, her child's educational opportunities and even her own daughter's age for marriage.

The entire family's future is dependent on the mother's health and wellbeing, which begins not when she gets married, but in fact from the time she herself is born. As a child and adolescent, a girl needs to receive proper nutrition for the adequate development of her body. She has to understand the changes her body goes through during adolescence, including learning healthy hygienic practices during menstruation.

Economic emancipation, education and awareness of her rights coupled with the support of her family and community might empower her with the space and confidence to marry at an age when she has the emotional capacity to fully participate in family decisions. A woman must be able to raise her voice regarding reproductive decisions like choosing when to conceive and where to deliver. On a larger

scale, a collective raising of women's voices leads to increasing demands on adequate healthcare facilities and services, prompting greater action from both the public and the private sectors to cater to their specific needs.

Mitali is pregnant again. While we can do little to change her past experiences, there is much to be done to ensure she and her children will enjoy a better future. The government of Bangladesh has already begun initiating women-friendly hospitals, providing emergency obstetric care in existing facilities and introducing voucher schemes to increase institutional delivery. Development organisations such as Brac, Care, ICDDR,B and Unicef are working in partnership with the government to improve access to and quality of care in both rural and urban areas.

Working directly with mothers and their communities, these organisations have developed innovative solutions revolving around skill-mixing and task-sharing among community health resources, increasing awareness, demand and support for institutional deliveries, provision of skilled attendants and trained supervision during home deliveries, inventive referral systems for emergencies, usage of new technology such as mobile phones, and the development and leveraging of community support networks to enhance community ownership.

It is now a question of translating knowledge into action -- replicating successful innovations nationwide, especially to hard-to-reach populations, and ensuring that marginalised women have the resources and the freedom they need to take advantage of this access. Public-private partnerships which leverage the comparative strengths of the different players are absolutely essential in effectively reaching scale.

As we edge closer to the year 2015, with Bangladesh within reach of the 4th and 5th Millennium Development Goals regarding health, it is important not to become complacent. Perhaps the ultimate tragedy lies in the fact that Mitali considers her ability to give birth an obligation, and producing living children a luxury. This is our greatest challenge. Only when our mothers realise their worth and own their power to give birth will we as a society realise the full benefits of safe motherhood.

(*Real names have been changed to protect privacy.)

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'London 2012: One year to go'

Today and for the next 12 months, we want to welcome the world to the UK to share in the Olympic and Paralympic experience and discover what makes Britain a great place to live, work, visit, invest and do business.

WILLIAM HAGUE

TODAY, Britain's young champion Tom Daley will dive into the waters of our stunning new Aquatics Centre and the ripples will be felt across the world. From Trafalgar Square in the heart of London, President Rogge of the International Olympic Committee will address nations around the globe. He will invite the world's top athletes to form teams to compete at the London 2012 Olympic and Paralympic Games. Our countdown will begin.

It is six years since the UK first won the privilege to host the Games in Singapore, and it has been a remarkable journey since. Everything is on track. Construction of the major venues is complete, a year ahead of Games time. We are on budget, on time and set to deliver a great summer of sport and culture.

This is going to be a show to remember -- and not just for the sport. Of course, the Games are about sporting excellence and extraordinary personal triumphs. No-one knows this better than my friend Lord Coe whose remarkable achievements make him uniquely qualified to put athletes at the heart of planning for 2012. But they are also about so much more.

For me, the Olympic and Paralympic Games are about one word above all others: legacy -- about the real difference they can make to people's lives. That's not just in the host city, or the host country, but around the world. This vision of an enduring legacy is woven into every aspect of the 2012 Games.

For example, East London, where many British Bangladeshis live, has already been transformed



The Olympic Stadium

before our eyes. Some of the greatest architects and engineers in their fields have designed sports venues that our communities and visitors will enjoy for years to come. And they have achieved this with a remarkable commitment to putting sustainability at the heart of the build, making London the first truly "green" Games in history.

But legacy is also about inspiration -- about giving young men and women hope and ambition. And through our International Inspiration programme we have used sport to reach out to over 12 million children in 17 countries across the world, from Azerbaijan to Zambia, and including Bangladesh.

Finally, it is about bringing people together under the Olympic values of friendship, respect and excellence. Over 3.5 million tickets have already been sold. Thousands of people have signed up to volunteer. Hundreds more have been nominated to bear the Olympic flame as it travels the highlands, lowlands and islands on its 70 day journey across the nation.

And for the two months of Olympic and Paralympic sport next summer, in every home and on every radio and television, the Games will be shared and enjoyed by the world.

That's why, as President Rogge invites Bangladesh's athletes to Britain in 2012, and as they start training for glory, I want to invite the people of Bangladesh to be a part of this momentous occasion too.

Today and for the next 12 months, we want to welcome the world to the UK to share in the Olympic and Paralympic experience and discover what makes Britain a great place to live, work, visit, invest and do business.

With 365 days to go, we are ready to host an outstanding Games that will live on in the difference it makes to millions of lives -- and we want everyone to be part of it.

The writer is the United Kingdom's Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs.

Public sector reform

JAMAL KHAN

It is easy to be critical and, even, sanctimonious or cynical. This may be the case with much-touted, and also much-maligned, public sector reforms. The entire world over, industrialised as well as developing, public sector reforms of one kind or another were and are being launched.

Across the world, while some reforms are sectoral in scope -- such as financial management, information and communication technologies, management information systems and performance and productivity -- others are more global and systemic, involving the entire public sector and its functions in one way or the other. In some countries and cultures, reforms were taken seriously, systematically and longitudinally and bore impressive results. In other countries, the results were mixed, uneven, unfocused and unrelated, and no specific causality or cause-effect relationships could be established.

Public sector reforms can owe their genesis to various stimuli. Without trying to be exhaustive, a big reason why reforms are undertaken has to do with historical baggage the public sector carries, e.g. dysfunctional traditions, elitism and exclusivism, negative operating culture, tyranny of hierarchies, levels and layers, counterproductive operating procedures, strained minister-personnel relations, over-centralisation, over-regulation and the culture of check, recheck and countercheck, tardiness and time/cost mismanagement, policy weakness and out-datedness, deficient customer service tradition, untrained/under-trained middle management and support-level personnel, and asymmetric and centralised power relations.

Real and perceived organisational and managerial weaknesses continue to cause problems in relation to policy and decision delivery, output generation and delivery, workflow, process, and customer service. Related to the reform drive is the disquieting fact of increasing organisational obsolescence and obsolescence in respect of the management system, its process, techniques, procedures and techniques, leadership capacity and behaviour, interpersonal relations, goal-setting and goal management, performance and productivity, and measurement and evaluation.

In developing countries, including Bangladesh, reforms are usually launched and carried through with a great deal of fanfare and hype -- especially by blue-ribbon and prestigious reform commissions. A conspicuous part of this exercise assumes the form

of umpteen commissions, inquiries, investigations, and in-house reviews.

In some instances the efforts are enormous, and even laudable, especially when it comes to big-league commissions, bedecked with distinguished professionals, national notables and high achievers. The commission members peruse materials and documents at home and abroad, visit overseas centres for comparable work reviews, pore over archival collections, research publications and inter-organisational reports, hold interviews and focus-group meetings, design and collect survey data, maintain media and community relations, and publish and disseminate results and findings.

Apparently, fund is allocated, spending is done, the terms of reference are provided, managerial support

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services are put in place, and high-level policy/political support is accorded. Expectations, over time, are heightened, hopes are raised, news conferences are held and communication with the larger community is established, various public relations tools are employed at strategic and vantage points and lofty, and often unattainable, promises are made.

Ready or not, the day of reckoning finally arrives. The commissions submit and release their reports to the senior leadership groups. It is expected that the reports would be studied and published, analyses would be looked at, recommendations would be examined, and implementation would kick in.

In case after case, especially with regard to public sector reforms, during the past Pakistan as well as the current Bangladesh times, reform implementation has been desultory and less than satisfactory.

In some instances, reform findings were shelved and even scuttled, implementation faltered, enforcement fell on its face, leadership vacillated and dithered, commitment and tenacity conspicuously waned, the implementation structure was vague, nebulous or nonexistent, and enormous public expenditures were

incurred only to be greeted with waste, delay, non-implementation, misdirection, hesitation, and short-fall.

What tends to happen, among other things, is that self-fulfilling prophecies come alive, the cynical cycle makes full circle, gloom and doom spread, dysfunctional status quo remains entrenched, special interests get deeper and wider, creativity and innovation are stultified, employee morale plummets, customer alienation increases, media and community remain sceptical, and organisation/management development get marginalised.

With recurrence, frequency, predictability, regularity and uniformity, public sector reforms have been known to fail, falter, and fumble. In the developing world, genuine, lasting and systemic success has been few, but shortfalls, disappointments, losses and failures are regrettably ubiquitous.

In numerous countries and cultures, tinkering, eyewash, shortcuts, cost-cutting and downsizing have been carried out fairly routinely in the name of reforms. But real transformative, structural, attitude-focused and customer-focused reform has remained, thus far, rather illusory, showing poor reform leadership, unproductive process, and short-term partisan orientation.

These reforms -- starting with a bang and ending with a whimper -- do not even amount to reorganisation and restructuring, let alone renewal and rejuvenation. There seems to be little or limited realisation that real and sustainable reforms call for hard choices. The intertemporal and intergenerational choices need to be made by serious policy-makers who demonstrate real understanding of the long-term nature of growth, development, regulation and management, show abiding and tenacious commitment to the goals and processes of reforms, recognise that there is no quick fix and no easy way out, appreciate the need for choices need to be made by visionary policy-makers who demonstrate in their behaviour critical and unstinted support for reforms, appreciate the need for consistency, know the crucial distinction between party politics and hardnosed management, appreciate the role of technology and measurement in management, and demonstrate will and ability in taking customers/people with the reform drive.

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