

INTERNATIONAL DAY FOR DISASTER REDUCTION

Women and girls: (In)visible force of resilience

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"BOTH women and men are part of the same society, which, as we know, does not mean we have the same rights, education and options to manage, neither in 'normal' times, nor when a disaster strikes." Women, Disaster Reduction and Sustainable Development, UNISDR Secretariat, April 2003.

Women have the wisdom and potential to survive, struggle against, and cope with natural hazards. Despite repeatedly demonstrating their resilience and abilities as problem solvers in the context of disasters, women are often regarded as mere victims, submissive performers and beneficiaries rather than stakeholders and partners and, as such, are marginalised from planning, decision making and agenda-setting processes.

Considering the overarching need and importance of recognising women's role and contributions the theme of International Day for Disaster Reduction this year is "Women and Girls: the [in]Visible Force of Resilience." This theme is appropriately focused on acknowledging the contributions of millions of women and girls who make their communities more resilient to disasters and climate risks, thus gaining the benefits of development.

Internationally, the day is being celebrated with Step Up initiatives with a call to the world for raising greater awareness about disasters. The Step Up initiative of UNISDR started in 2011 by focusing on different groups every year -- Children and Young People (2011), Women and Girls (2012), Ageing Population (2013), and People with Disabilities (2014) -- leading up to the World Conference for Disaster Reduction in 2015.

Gender differences are often most significant in the aftermath of a disaster as in most cases women are more vulnerable and the mortality rate is higher than those of men. Although in reality they represent an immense source of potential and power to combat the increased disaster risks that need equal emphasis and particular attention while addressing gender dimensions in any given situation. Studies show that in any disaster dispro-

portionately large numbers of women are affected more severely relative to men.

Globally, it has largely been established that when gender issues are not addressed satisfactorily in both development and disaster contexts, they perpetuate, and in most instances enhance, existing gender-based inequities. Since the World Conference on Women in 1995 in Beijing, "gender mainstreaming" has been recognised as an overarching strategy to ensure that gender concerns are incorporated in all areas, sectors, and levels to promote gender equality. The current global disaster risk reduction framework, the Hyogo Framework for Action (2005), identifies community participation and gender perspectives as cross-cutting issues that must be addressed in all five priority areas of action to build resilient nations and communities. But the 2011 Mid-Term Review of the HFA found that gender concern is rarely taken into account when planning development activities (UNISDR, 2012).

This is largely because the process and content of the national report follow the conventional perspective that tends to sidestep the tremendous role and contributions of women and girls in public life. This perspective needs to be reversed to give women and girls the acclaim and acknowledgment that are due to them.

However, for the first time this year initiative was taken to adequately reflect gender concerns and progress in the HFA report from Bangladesh under the leadership of Ministry of Disaster Management & Relief and the Comprehensive Disaster Management Programme (CDMP II), which is being implemented with the technical support of UNDP.

According to the UNDP's Human Development

Report, Bangladesh has made commendable progress in ensuring equity for women and maintained a steady pace in human development over the last two decades. The HDR 2011 results for gender equity are especially encouraging for the country. New maternal mortality figures have led to a transformative change in the Gender Inequality Index, which improved by some 25% in a single year. This puts the country in the fifth position among the Low Human Development countries. The remarkable progress that Bangladesh has made shows strong long-term commitment to women's empowerment, and is specifically under-

pinned by accelerated progress towards the Millennium Development Goal (MDG).

The National Women Development Policy, 2011 Bangladesh has the provision of rehabilitation of women affected by natural disaster and armed conflicts (Vide

section 16.16 of NWDP) as one of the key objectives. Clear directions have been given to undertake special measures for the protection, safeguarding and empowerment of women and girls before, during and after any disaster situation through providing awareness building training, skills and other technical support. The revised Standing Orders on Disaster (SOD) have outlined particular gender concerns and guidelines to be followed by the responsible government departments, ministries and sub-national bodies including communities.

Following CDMP II, work is in progress for mainstreaming of gender issues in disaster management with the support of Department of Women Affairs under the Ministry of Women and Children Affairs, and the Risk Reduction Action Plan is in place. Around one-third out of 50,000 Cyclone Preparedness Programme (CPP) volunteers are women who are actively involved in raising community awareness and preparedness on disasters in remote locations. In the urban context, the government has taken initiatives to create a pool of 62,000 urban volunteers, with one-third of them being women. Already a significant number of women volunteers are playing proactive role with their male counterparts.

Although distinct progress has been made at policy level, yet links between gender dimensions, disaster-prone communities, and policymakers remain tenuous in reality. The increase in both magnitude and frequency of disasters in the country creates an urgent need for grassroots women's contributions to be acknowledged, and for up-streaming of women's wisdom, insights and skills. Women are agents of change, actors and contributors at all levels of the society. Complete realisation and understanding of the roles, contributions and knowledge of women and men in relation to the natural resource base are vital in combating natural disasters, particularly in terms of risk reduction and management.

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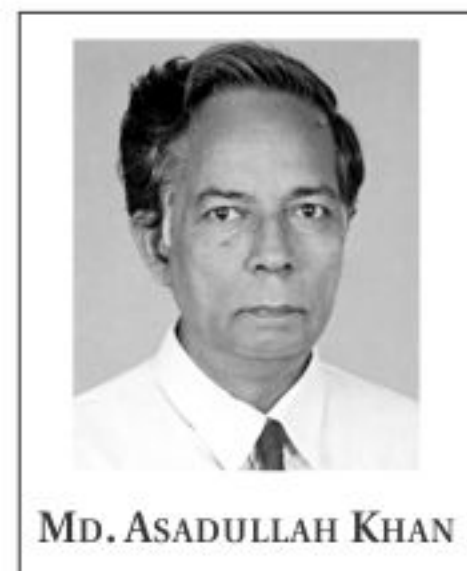


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BITTER TRUTH

Creating jobs for rural youth



Md. ASADULLAH KHAN

UAE government has stopped issuing entry permits to Bangladeshi passport holders is really alarming. It is most worrisome in the context of the fact that already about a million Bangladeshi expatriate workers are employed there and our mission in Abu Dhabi is totally ignorant about any such restriction being imposed.

The unfortunate, nay gullible, people who come to the metropolis become victims of the manpower agents, many of whom operate illegally. Political leaders and the party in power can't remain oblivious to the issue of people's life and living, and cannot avoid being drawn into the turmoil in the countryside. People at the helm of the administration would be betraying their ideals and promises if they fail to reach out to the struggling populace in the countryside, who are threatened by economic hardship, political violence, social tension, strife and popular disillusionment. The penalty for delay could be further chaos, spiraling crime wave and unstoppable waves of economic refugees to the city areas with further chances of falling victim to unscrupulous and greedy manpower agents.

It would be quite naïve to think that the country could be turned into an oasis of peace, stability and prosperity when the teeming millions are steeped in squalor and poverty. What is evident now is that the future of a country that was so tantalisingly rich in promises seems to be fraught with dangers. We have squandered many possibilities and opportunities to put the economy on an even keel. If the people in the rural areas are not given job opportunities through creation of infrastructural facilities for industries based on rural products, they will descend on the metropolises in ever increasing numbers.

The country is struggling under a bloated bureaucracy, lavish government spending and a collection of monopolies and cartels barely familiar with the concept of competition and democratic governance. At the same time, most of the state-run enterprises have either ceased to function or have been closed down because of mounting loss due to lack of experience, initiative, incentive and entrepreneurial dynamism among those running them.

Despite the fact that the present government contemplated pursuing economic reform and restructuring with considerable energy, the effort has almost ended in a fiasco for lack of vision, leadership and imaginative schemes for economic progress. We must subject ourselves to serious self-criticism. In our 41st year of inde-

pendence there is no greater shame than the fact that nearly half our people live in such appalling misery that their standard of living actually improves when they move to the pavements and slums of cities. People wonder as to what prevented us from making investment in roads, electricity, water availability and the sort of agro-industries that would have created jobs in rural Bangladesh.

In almost every region of Bangladesh, rural people have craft and artisan traditions that could produce goods and services which urban Bangladeshis, not to mention foreigners, would buy if the villages had access to roads, public transport and markets. Roads, railways, telephones and electricity are essential tools in the 21st century. Appallingly, the investment we had made in roads and electricity leaked profusely because of lack of proper monitoring and surveillance. On the other hand, poverty alleviation programmes leaked so profusely that some of our saner politicians publicly admitted that no more than 50 paise of every taka actually reached the people it was meant for.

Our weaknesses have been caused entirely by

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the economic policies of our governments. No country can depend on grants and loans for all the time. The problem has multiplied because the governments in the past two decades hardly took any measures to create growth centres beyond the cities. In many ways, the cities are self-feeding monsters perpetuating their own growth in some selected areas by devouring the country's resources.

Most of the cities and towns, not to speak of the rural areas, remain brazenly neglected. Roads, bridges and other infrastructure, deemed to be most essential for overall growth and mobility in business are in bad shape. This discriminatory attitude or lack of attention has created a great imbalance in income generation in the outlying areas and has given rise to tensions and mounting discontent that tend to bedevil the good works done in some selected areas. All told, the unending tide of mass exodus to cities, especially Dhaka city, can hardly be stopped even by draconian measures with the condition of the rural surroundings remaining neglected.

The country's move towards industrial growth

that will offer employment opportunities seems to have stalled, mainly because of the severe crisis in power generation. Admittedly, electricity is the driving force behind economic progress. With indigenous gas reserve dwindling fast, fossil fuel becoming scarcer and its price shooting up in the international market, the planners and decision makers must look for alternative fuel sources to keep the already strained economy running.

Despite the all-pervasive doom and gloom in the industrial front, there is a glimmer of hope from the shipbuilding sector. Founded in 1957 a shipyard in Khulna, after years of limping growth, has proved to be a profitable concern because of management capability. The shipbuilding industry has the potential to build ships, ferries, fishing trawlers, river vessels and even warships. Reports have it that, entrusted with the job of constructing 5 warships for Bangladesh Navy in 2011, the shipyard handed over a warship of 255 ton capacity to Bangladesh Navy at a cost of Tk.58 crore, which the navy would have to purchase at a cost of Tk.100 crore if it was procured from outside.

With a little effort, commitment and entrepreneurial dynamism, we can change the face of the country and put it on the path of progress and prosperity. The crisis is severe and comes at a time of vulnerability. The energy pressure alone threatens the growth of industrial plants, stifles the operational line of the existing plants and breeds social chaos and political instability. With so many obstacles standing in the way, there is hardly a comfortable climate for investment. Many foreign investors assess and evaluate the political situation before committing funds for industrial concerns or power plants. Economists and social scientists believe that until a stable solution to the lingering political impasse can be found, most investors will look elsewhere.

The vast numbers of unemployed youths in the countryside can be rehabilitated by a slow and steady infusion of loans by the government agencies and NGOs in line with the ACCION operating in Santa Domingo in Peru. The loans, which are accompanied by management training and technical assistance, allow entrepreneurs to buy goods and raw materials in bulk and purchase machines to boost output. ACCION's funding comes from donations and low interest loans by foundations, corporations and individuals. They also free the borrowers from the usurious rates charged by the loan sharks.

With frustration writ large on the faces of young men because of their inability to find any suitable means of living, they sell off their last resources and start their journey to the lands of broken promises. But with a little bit of planning and concerted effort by all sections of the people, especially the party in power, these villages could be turned into oases of peace, stability and prosperity.

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Indian humour



humour all their own. It's not easy to get into -- but it's well worth the effort.

In a bid to battle the imminent tragedy of global humour being defined by "America's Funniest Home Videos," this blog occasionally pays homage to under-appreciated comedy from Asia. Today's focus: South Asian humour.

Typical, homegrown north Indian jokes often circulate in marvellous Indian-English slang. Example: "Manager: Raju! You was discharged from hospital yesterday only. Why you come office today itself?" Raju: "Doctor told me take rest for a month. That's why I come to office!" OK, so it doesn't travel that well, but it really does evoke the ethos of Indian office banter.

Irony is usually classified as a Western invention, but wags in south Asia sometimes poke fun at aspects of our own culture -- such as the long names we carry. Example: James Bond is on a mission. He ends up on a flight next to a guy from Andhra Pradesh who speaks Telugu. Telugu Guy: "Hello. May I know your good name, please?" James Bond: "The name's Bond. James Bond. You are...?" Telugu Guy: "The name's Sai. Venkata Sai. Siva Venkata Sai. Laxminarayana Siva Venkata Sai. Srinivasula Laxminarayana Siva Venkata Sai. Rajasekhara Srinivasula Laxminarayana Siva Venkata Sai. Sitaramanjanyula Rajasekhara Srinivasula Laxminarayana Siva Venkata Sai..."

This joke continues like this for a long time, but you get the picture. And now you know why there's no Indian James Bond. The movie would be over before he'd finished introducing himself.

Non-Resident Indians, better known as NRIs, often swap laughs on cultural treasures of their motherland, such as Bollywood movies.

Example: If Titanic had been made by Bollywood: (a) There would be ten times as many people on the ship; (b) Kate Winslet would wear a white dress and sing in the rain; (c) The movie would be seven and half hours long; (d) Leo di Caprio would chase Kate Winslet around the ship, singing and dancing around pillars; (e) The hero and the villain would turn out to be brothers, separated at birth; (f) Leo would have a sister, brother, mother, father and uncle on board; (g) Leo would survive and rescue his villainous brother, and the film would end with a musical family reunion.

Actually, judging by the level of crass melodrama in it, I think Titanic probably was an Indian movie.

Meanwhile, the humour of young South Asian people nearly always focuses on the generation gap.

Example: You know you are South Asian if: (a) Your dad is an engineer or doctor; (b) Everyone assumes you're good at math; (c) You have a 25-kilo sack of rice in your pantry; (d) Your father has the same amount of hair on his ears as his head; (e) You have rocks, sticks, leaves and mysterious strange-smelling substances in your medicine cabinet; (f) You refer to all adults as Auntie and Uncle.

South Asians often feel unfairly stereotyped, so some react against it with sardonic humour.

Example: Westerner: "Why do your women wear red dots on their foreheads?" South Asian: "So their husbands can use them for target practice."

Westerner: "Are you all vegetarian?" South Asian: "Yes. Even our tigers are vegetarian."

Westerner: "Do you speak Hindu?" South Asian: "Yes. And I belong to a religion called Hindi."

Westerner: "Why do you people walk on burning coals?" South Asian: "It makes our feet strong so we don't have to buy designer shoes."

Westerner: "Why do you go around on elephants?" South Asian: "Elephants are what we use for taxis. There's a meter behind the left ear."

OK, so I don't expect to see a stand-up from Hyderabad displacing Jay Leno tomorrow. But it is important to realise that people who live in Asia, and particularly South Asia, have our own sense of humour.

And boy, do we need it.

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