

BITTER TRUTH

# Torture on women unheard, unspoken



Md. ASADULLAH KHAN

**D**OMESTIC violence is a less talked about form of repression that women suffer without ever protesting because it takes place away from public view. Women consider marriage as a bond that must be protected at all costs. In most cases, they go to unbelievable lengths to make that relationship durable in the face of all odds and atrocities that come their way. A broken marriage is very often attributed to the woman's failings. Most worryingly, women endure this mental and physical torture of husbands without uttering a word of protest because society's attitude towards women has never been anything very assuring.

In villages marriage is considered a sanctified bond united in the worst or best of times, in sickness or in health through the vicissitudes of fortune. But dowry related deaths have shattered that bond of happy and peaceful relationship. Reports published in a leading newspaper on October 26 said that Shaju Khatun (35), a housewife in Chuadanga, and Parvin Begum, an assistant teacher in a primary school in Bogra were killed for their failure to meet dowry demands. Such grim reports continue to pour in with every passing day.

A report released by the UN Population Fund revealed that 47% of adult women reported physical abuse by their male partners. According to human rights groups, there were 81 dowry-related killings during this year. Press reports indicate increasing incidences of vigilantism against women led by so-called religious leaders in rural areas. These include humiliating and painful punishments, such as whipping, of women accused of moral offences, which were hardly supported by factual investigation. According to police records, while there were 2,981 cases of dowry-related violence in 2004, the figure hit 4,563 in the first nine months of 2012.

Although many cases of dowry harassment were reported of late, a staggering number were not. Despite all attempts to prevent it, an epidemic appears to be in the making. It is a phenomenon that escapes easy answers due to complex mix of social trends. The sudden affluence of a section of people that emerged starting from the rural areas to the cities in the late '80s is the primary reason. The money, as social scientists say, was not channelised productively. With "get-rich-quick" becoming the new goal of life, dowry became the perfect instrument for upward material mobility. Growing consumerism, flashy life styles and in most cases joblessness and drug addiction are fueling these crimes. If once a bicycle, a wristwatch or some money for starting a business sufficed for the lesser income groups, nowadays, along with home appliances, a huge amount of cash money is included in the demand list.

What is most alarming are the edicts issued by

some self-styled religious leaders and village "matubbars" that subject housewives and rape victims to trauma, humiliation and inhuman punishments on hearsay evidence and rumours floated in the locality by mischievous persons out of revenge based on long-standing family feud or property dispute or inability to meet dowry demands. A report published in a newspaper on October 3 said that Nurun Nahar Begum and her husband Moksedur Rahman of Dinajpur were subjected to lashing along with a fine of Tk.2 lakh by a local arbitration council meeting on the basis of an unconfirmed report of adultery on the part of Nurun Nahar. Strangely, the alleged perpetrator was not asked to be present in the arbitration council meeting and it was more intriguing to learn that her husband was subjected to this lashing punishment also.

What happened in Mirersarai of Chittagong defies all human sensibilities. Here, the alleged

domain of trying offences of this nature.

It is so intriguing that every time such a horrendous crime is committed, the apex court has to issue rule on the administration saying that the administration has been failing to live up to people's expectation. In any case, the police and the civil administration can't evade the responsibility of the charges made against them.

True, crimes and criminality exist in every society, but sexual violation of women and even minors and patronage of the offenders by a section of influential persons and in most cases by the police manifests a sort of depravity which, unless checked, will tear apart the social fabric. It is not unusual in our country that every time such dastardly acts of sexual assault take place and *fatwa*-based *salishes* are held, people become naturally outraged and loud protests are voiced by all, especially by human rights activists. But, as it often happens, the alleged offenders and their patrons go away with impunity, and the perpetrators feel emboldened to commit crimes of greater enormity.

Criminologists and crime records bureau of the government and some NGOs assert that crime rate among the youth, especially deviant young husbands, has gone up alarmingly. The survey makes particular mention of the fact that there is a noticeable increase in dowry related crimes by young husbands and their families belonging to all strata of the society.

For women, it is a difficult battle to win. They are handicapped by history, victims of a firmly embedded gender system. Women face double peril. Inside the barred doors, it is humiliation. Outside, there awaits public ire. Harassed and tortured women are now going to court or police for protection. But even if appeals for protection are met, only scorn greets them when they return home. Despite every stigma, dowry continues to be the signature of marriage.

Unhappily, there exists an ambivalent attitude in a majority of the modern families who participate in dowry based marriages instead of opposing them. People talk glibly about dowry prohibition and anti-dowry movement but when it comes to the wedding of their own sons and daughters, most people would indulge in the vice themselves, too.

More intriguing, in most cases girls to be married off don't have any knowledge of or participation in the deal. Dowry is often a monetary deal between two parties -- the bride's father and the groom or his relations. Despite the promulgation of Acid Control Act 2002 and Dowry Prevention Act 1980, the number of dowry related violence is climbing. The law may help in taking temporary punitive action, but women will need real social and ideological support to stand firmly against an age-old system that has almost got an unwritten societal sanction.

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SHAFIQUL AMIN/DRIK NEWS

perpetrators turned out to be the arbiters of justice. Mahfuzul Huq, a member of the local union parishad, the alleged perpetrator of sexual abuse on Asma Akhtar, arranged an arbitration council meeting on October 2, participated by some of his aides in the ruling party, and issued an edict that Asma be pelted with stones with her body put in a chest-deep hole in the ground for some unexplained sexual offences. The arbitration meeting was held following filing of a case by Asma against the perpetrators. She is now hiding to save her life. The Hon'ble High Court, after hearing a petition by Advocate Manzil Murshid on behalf of Human Rights and Peace for Bangladesh, has summoned the officer-in-charge of Mirersarai Police Station and Mahfuzul Huq to appear before it on November 5 to explain their roles.

No Islamic law prescribes such dispensation of justice that punishes the victim and glorifies the offender. All these incidents and resultant sufferings expose the sordid side of police inaction as well as community leaders' legal standing and

SHIFTING IMAGES

## From 'burqas' to 'binders'



MILLIA ALI

**I**N what new ways do you intend to rectify the inequalities in the workplace, specifically regarding females making only 72% of what their male counterparts earn?" a woman asked Mitt Romney during the second US presidential debate. Governor Romney's response, which sparked the maximum number of comments and

tweets in this election season, was: "We took a concerted effort to go out and find women who had backgrounds that could be qualified to become members of our cabinet. I went to a number of women's groups and said, can you help us find folks? And I brought us whole binders full of -- of women." Romney's claim being that he made a proactive endeavour to find and hire qualified women during his tenure as governor of Massachusetts.

For many women, including myself, Mitt Romney's reply demonstrated how out of touch he is on women's issues. In fact, the former governor added insult to injury by asserting that he had allowed his female chief of staff to go home early so that she could prepare "dinner for her kids." The implication is that the main reason a woman works flexible hours is because she needs to go home and cook for her family!

I have no pretensions of being a feminist, but as a woman who has been in the work force and at the same time raised two kids, I thought Mitt Romney's comments

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to be offensive. To me and many women like me, it's demeaning that a successful business CEO with an MBA from Harvard had to rummage through a "binder" to find qualified women for responsible positions in his cabinet. Moreover, it was frustrating to see candidate Romney sidetrack a question on equal compensation by taking credit for making a great effort to employ women. Of course, whether the women were actually employed or their resumes remained trapped in "binders" is still unclear!

It may be hard for many of you to believe, but women in the US do get paid less than men and the struggle for equality is still underway and incomplete. The first bill that President Obama signed was the Lilly Ledbetter Fair Pay Act, which allowed female employees to file a lawsuit for pay discrimination. Mind you, not the right to demand equal pay but just the right to fight discrimination in court. Governor Romney and his Republican party have openly declared that they will overturn the law if elected. Don't raise your eyebrows yet because this is only the tip of the iceberg. The Republicans also have rigid anti-abortion and anti-contraception positions -- some have categorically stated that abortion should not be allowed even for extreme cases like rape or incest!

The good news is that the 2012 elections have highlighted women's concerns and problems like no previous presidential race. All three debates have touched upon core gender issues. As a result, stark differences have surfaced between the two candidates on their basic approach toward mitigating gender bias on the policy front. The Democrats and President Obama advocate that women should have the choice to make decisions about their own reproductive health in consultation with their doctors and, more importantly, women's health should be integrated within the Health Care system. Sadly, most Republicans including Governor Romney and his vice presidential candidate, are opposed to this view since they believe this is in conflict with their pro-life stance.

As I watched the two men, President Obama and Governor Romney, spar in the debates over issues that would significantly impact the lives of so many women, including my daughter and granddaughter, I was overcome with a sense of disillusionment at a system which still questioned a woman's right to be treated as an equal. I fondly remembered my father who taught me to believe in my potential as a human being. He provided me with the best education that he could afford and I don't remember ever thinking that I was in any way handicapped because I am a woman. My father was well-educated but did not have a Harvard degree. Yet he was eons ahead in his vision for women as compared to many of the Ivy League trained men that are in powerful elected positions in the United States today!

It is mind boggling that a country that is at the cutting edge of technological advancement, and has a constitution that ensures equal, inalienable rights to all its citizens, should still be debating about whether or not women should receive the same compensation as men at work!

It took women thousands of years to penetrate beyond the veil -- how long will it take to be freed from 'binders'?

The writer is a renowned Rabindra Sangeet exponent and a former employee of the World Bank.

## Recent 5 oddest news items



Nury Vittachi

1) A Woman faked a kidnapping last week so that she could get a day off work. People have no integrity these

collect the cash himself.

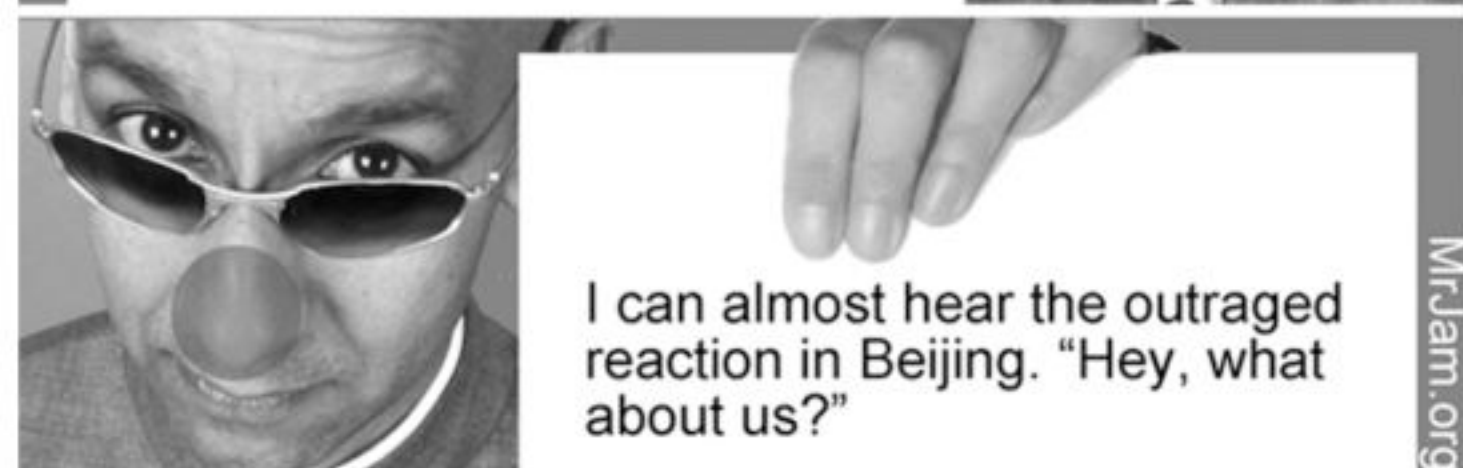
I sent the reporter who covered the case a note to pass on to the kid: "Hey, guy, there are some jobs you really should delegate."

If you are planning to kidnap yourself, hire professionals. Give me a call.

2) The latest news reports are saying former top cyclist Lance Armstrong ran "the biggest and most sophisticated doping programme in sports history."



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Armstrong told the press he "didn't have the energy" to fight back. Hey, Lance, if there's one person on this planet who cannot use the excuse that he's short of energy boosters, it's you!

3) One in seven humans worldwide has a mobile phone, researchers said last week. In Hong Kong, the mobile phone population has overtaken the human population. The devices must be phoning each other to keep sane.

4) The mystery of the red-bearded prisoner has been solved. People were puzzling as to how Khalid Sheikh Mohammed appeared in court with a bright ginger-auburn beard, since Guantanamo Bay prison is not exactly known for its hair salon culture. Jailers revealed he "used crushed berries from his breakfast" to make hair dye.

Crushed berries from his breakfast? I always stop my kids buying that cereal with dried strawberry chunks because it's so expensive. To improve my living standards, I need to move to Guantanamo Bay prison. No doubt it can be arranged.

5) A Judge in Italy last week sentenced seismologists to six years in jail for telling people not to worry just before a major earthquake.

If I was them, I'd tell the appeals judge: "By the way, there's no need to run away screaming as we confidently predict there will be no major earthquake right here sixty seconds from now, heh-heh-heh. Fifty-nine. Fifty-eight. Fifty-seven..."

Watch the judge sign the papers and run.

For more strange news from around the world, visit vittachi at: <http://www.mrjam.org>

days! She should just phone in sick like the rest of us.

Sheila Bailey Eubank, 48, spent the day away from her office in California, US, and then tied herself up in her car and told police she had been kidnapped. But videos from shops she had entered revealed she was lying.

This columnist has noted many cases like this. I blame TV.

In Japan, a 29-year-old man overslept, missing an 8 a.m. meeting. But you know how dedicated to work salarymen are. Burning with humiliation, he kidnapped himself, drove himself out of town, beat himself up and dumped himself in the middle of nowhere.

Then he called his colleagues. "So sorry to miss the meeting, I got kidnapped, you know how it is." Yeah, right.

Sometimes people do it for money. There was one case in my files in which a schoolboy kidnapped himself, demanded a ransom, and then went to