



Horror of Acid Violence Continues to Haunt Women

Enabling justice

The United Nations in Bangladesh and The Daily Star have joined hands to raise awareness on violence against women, as part of the UN Secretary General's global UNiTE campaign. This is the final installment in a series of articles that have appeared in The Daily Star, focusing on the context, the policy interventions, and the actions needed in combating violence against women in Bangladesh.

STEFAN PRIESSNER

EVERY day, the pages of the leading newspapers of Bangladesh report numerous stories of violence against women. A woman tortured by her in-laws because of a dowry dispute; a girl who was so mortified by the harassment of neighbourhood boys that she took her own life; a migrant worker who puts up with constant, unspeakable abuse to keep the job that feeds her children back home.

Violence against women and girls is commonplace in Bangladesh, where statistics show that one in three women face some form of violence. In November 2012 alone, 422 such incidents were reported in national newspapers: more than two-thirds of these involved physical assault, a large portion of the remainder of cases involved sexual abuse (with 62 incidents involving children), and not a negligible number involved burns, including acid violence. Even more alarming, 161 of the victims were murdered and 54 committed suicide.

These statistics are, however, the tip of the iceberg -- a glimpse of a reality that is far more widespread, as the ratio of reported cases to those that never enter the formal justice system is still very low in Bangladesh. Because of cultural attitudes and social taboos, few crimes are reported or investigated.

One of the biggest stumbling blocks to justice is the social mindset, even among women, that if a woman has experienced violence, she must also share a portion of the

blame. In a recent survey by the Bangladesh National Human Rights Commission, more than 63% of married women said that violence against wives is "acceptable," especially in cases of "disobedience." Only 18% of victims reported having accessed formal justice. Women have difficulty accessing justice because they are poorer, have a lower social status and must conform to traditional gender roles.

Those who do seek justice usually turn to the traditional dispute resolution mechanism of the shalish, which is often marked by discrimination and human rights violations that leave survivors even more distraught, if not beaten and tortured.

This must change.

If violence against women is to end, it must be punished. And for perpetrators to be held accountable, victims must be able to turn to an effective, fair and accountable justice system.

UNDP Bangladesh has worked closely with the government and civil society partners to create frameworks and systems that will ensure that victims of violence get the services they need and deserve from the initial point of contact of seeking justice to the last.

A first step has been to ensure that women

are treated fairly and respectfully by law enforcement officials and don't have to fear that reporting a crime will put them at risk of harassment or mistreatment by police. UNDP's Police Reform Programme has focused on hiring and training female police officers. In the past three years, the number of trained female police officers has doubled to number 3,000. And in partnership with

Through its Activating Village Courts project, UNDP is supporting efforts to provide access to justice services for poor women and men, who can't afford to get involved in legal processes that can stretch on for years. The village courts initiative has led to the creation of women-friendly, geographically accessible legal institutions. The establishment of village courts across the country aims to reduce

women to come forward with their complaints. In this way, village courts supplement rather than replace the formal justice system, referring cases on to the formal justice system when the offence is serious in nature. They have also been critical in raising awareness and changing attitudes toward violence against women in the community. A proposed amendment of the Village Court Act makes it mandatory that women are included in panels that hear cases relating to women.

UNDP is also supporting the efforts of Bangladesh to provide free legal aid to poor citizens, in particular poor women, as a citizen's access to justice cannot depend on the ability to pay legal fees. Since 2010, in five districts, there has been an average monthly increase of 154% in legal aid applications, approximately half of which were from women.

Though these are all positive developments, it is clear that there is much more to be done to enable justice and combat violence against women. As in other countries throughout the world, the culture of violence, and the silence around it, is deeply rooted within Bangladeshi society.

Ending violence against women is not just a women's issue. Rather, it must be considered central to determining whether Bangladesh will achieve sustainable human development and, more important, fulfill the promises of equality enshrined in its constitution.

The writer is Country Director, UNDP Bangladesh.



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legal complexities and backlogs of cases which represent a key reason why many fail to obtain justice.

Demand for village courts has increased exponentially: by now several thousand people are approaching the courts every month; and a third of the total number of cases has involved women plaintiffs. By providing women a place to seek justice and ensuring that the processes are not prolonged, the village courts have encouraged

What the Nobel Prize for Peace means to Europe and Bangladesh

WILLIAM HANNA

WITH news coverage focusing on the ongoing euro crisis, demonstrators protesting austerity in the streets of European capitals, and commentators predicting the breakup of our union, the European Union may not have seemed the most obvious choice for the Nobel Peace Prize.

And yet the Nobel Committee announced the EU would receive the award for having "contributed to the advancement of peace and reconciliation, democracy and human rights in Europe," recalling "what can happen if disintegration starts and if we let extremism and nationalism start growing again in Europe."

This was a timely reminder of the need to learn the lessons of history. My generation was fortunate not to be called upon, like previous generations, to fight other Europeans, but to work together for our common future.

For this we owe a debt to the visionary founding fathers of the European Union. The origin and raison d'être of the EU as a peace process for war-torn Europe is often overlooked. It is sometimes forgotten that economic integration among the nations of Europe was originally a means to an end -- peace, democracy, prosperity -- not an end in itself.

In 1973, the year that the UK, Ireland and Denmark joined what we then called the "Common Market," I decided to study European Integration. I could see how religious bigotry and intolerance between nationalists and unionists were tearing apart my home city of Belfast.

Twenty years later EU membership brought Ireland and the UK together in a way that was unprecedented in history, and helped restore the confidence and trust to build a peace process in Northern Ireland.

As our Nobel laureate poet Seamus Heaney put it, "Once in a while a tidal wave of justice rises up, and hope and history rhyme."

The EU has already largely delivered more than 50 years of peace in a part of the world that had unleashed two world wars. It has grown from 6 to 27 member countries, expanding to 28 next year, all of which are committed to peace for our 500 million citizens.

Today we have a union founded on shared values and the rule of law with a heart that beats for freedom, democracy and human rights.

The continent that was for many years divided by an iron curtain is now united. When we held a party of delegation staff to celebrate news of the Nobel Prize, our colleagues from the Czech Republic poignantly told us how much it meant for them when their country became a member of the European Union.

Our challenge now, as veterans and survivors of World War II pass on, is to make sure that people born

Bangladesh can count on the European Union to support its development through trade and aid, and also to work with it at the global level to face climate change and other challenges of the 21st century.

grants and humanitarian aid to this country.

The political will that founded our union 6 decades ago remains. We are tackling our current crisis -- a comprehensive approach involving both direct help to the debt-burdened countries and a more fundamental overhaul with a focus on increased fiscal coordination, integration of our banking and financial sectors, and enhanced competitiveness for our economies.

It is by no means an easy task. Just as after the war, we need more European integration, not less. Our member states remain committed to this path because together we are more than the sum of our parts.

Many Bangladeshis have congratulated us on the award of this prize. I have found that people know about it all over the country. Whenever we talk about the values of democracy, human rights and peace -- whether we are in a remote village in Sirajganj or at a workshop in Dhaka, there is great interest.

As a young Bangladeshi put it to me recently, "There is a great demand for these values." Indeed, young people in Bangladesh may understand better than some young Europeans what this award is all about.

Bangladesh can count on the European Union to support its development through trade and aid, and also to work with it at the global level to face climate change and other challenges of the 21st century. In all these areas you can expect the European Union to remain a committed and reliable partner.

SYEDA MARIA HOSSAIN

SINCE when did life start having a price tag attached to it? Going by BGMEA counts, life is worth one lakh taka or less than 2,000 dollars. In an industry where only a few manufacturers meet the minimal required amenities for workers while the rest pay no heed to these needs, quoting such numbers is rather ironic to say the least. In the past 22 years, there have been around 33 fires in garment factories, claiming lives of more than 500 workers. On the November 24, the most devastating fire in the history of garment manufacturing broke out leaving 124 dead and injuring many. Many workers were not even allowed to leave their work station as the fire burned.

Kamrun Nahar, who worked as a sewing machine operator on the fifth floor, said that they tried to rush to the ground floor as the alarm went off, but found the gate on second floor staircase locked. Supervisors of the factory told her to return to work. "I helplessly waited for two minutes and then ran towards another staircase. Around 50 men and women followed me and we reached the exit on the

ground floor, where all the staircases meet. We felt heat and saw smoke when we came down." It is obvious that had the factory ensured greater fire safety compliances and regulations, many lives could have been saved. In addition, workers were neither trained in fire extinguishing nor were they prepared for fire evacuations.

This tragedy has drawn considerable international attention and reaction from both apparel companies and human rights organisations. Some buyers are introducing zero tolerance policies to safety compliances. Companies like Wal-Mart already had flagged this factory as non-compliant, giving it an orange status, but the company still paid no heed. Another apparel giant Sears stated that their garments were sub-contracted to this factory without their approval. Tommy Hilfiger -- whose famous label was traced to several of the factories -- acknowledged in an interview that the conditions are "unacceptable" and "tragic." Hilfiger promised to go to Bangladesh to demand better conditions and the company that owns this brand, PVH Corp. responded to the ABC News investigation by committing between \$1 million and \$2 million to make significant improvements.

Question already has been raised on the authenticity of the compliance certificate of RMG in Bangladesh. Continued insensitivity of the local RMG entrepreneurs to safe working conditions have

A fire that burns deeper than it appears

SYEDA MARIA HOSSAIN

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forced workers to look for alternative sources of support as reflected in the words of the Bangladeshi labour activist Kalpona Akter, who urged Wal-Mart and other well-known American clothing brands to improve working conditions. "The brands can really play a vital role as they are the most powerful and can put pressure on the factory owners and the Bangladeshi government."

When the biggest foreign exchange earner and export sector of Bangladesh is facing serious risk of being negatively categorised by the important international buyers, the role of the government needs to be more proactive. Till this day, very little has been done to send a firm signal to the international community that the government of Bangladesh is stepping in to prevent such occurrences and by bringing the negligent owners to justice.

Other than the standard procedures of some visits by ministers and formation of fact-finding committees, very little of either substance or value has happened to reassure stakeholders that the lessons learned have not gone without necessary rectification.

If buyers increasingly perceive Bangladesh as an unsafe country to manufacture

their goods, they would rather preserve their image than save a few cents by producing in Bangladesh. The Tazreen Fashions incident has raised basic questions on some fundamental issues that include labour laws, human rights, safety standards, international image. If we continue to do what we are good at doing -- react instantly, realise temporarily, promise unnecessarily, and repeat remorselessly -- then the day is not too far that one of the very few sectors that play an important role in the industrial and economic sector of the country will be on an irreversible downward slope of losing both advantage and relevance in the international apparel market.

The fire that started in the floor of Tazreen Fashion will leave much deeper scar and wounds in the national economy if we remain insensitive in protecting those who toil all year through to keep the wheels of economy moving through their relentless work and accompanying poor wages. Any form of injustice and irresponsibility has a natural path of self-correction if left unattended for long. In our case, losing either the market or the competitive edge that Bangladesh currently enjoys may bring consequences more catastrophic than the fire itself. The fire may indeed leave burns deeper than they appear.

The writer is a banker and gender specialist.

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The writer is the European Union Ambassador to Bangladesh.