

Promoting Child Rights

Bringing changes in family and community

UPASHANA SALAM
Hafizur Rahman of Tarash sub-district of Sirajganj says that his son taught him the importance of washing hands with soaps after using the washroom.
"My son got a sticker and asked me to buy a soap, toothbrush and toothpaste for him or he wouldn't go to school. I had to spend Tk 100 for this, but later it seemed like a worthwhile expense," Rahman said.
Many other parents like Rahman were taught an important lesson on hygiene from their children, who acted as child agents to bring a change in the hygiene practice of their family and locality.
Children are able to bring about a change in the sanitation practice of their community through their involvement in the Student Brigade programme initiated in Classes three to five of each primary school in 19 districts under SHEWA-B project implemented by Department of Public Health with the support of UNICEF.
Through practical knowledge of cleanliness, children are taught about the importance of hygiene and encouraged to disseminate this knowledge amongst their friends, family members and locality.
Children are responsible for cleaning their schools, classrooms, school toilets, tube well platforms and ensuring that everything is kept spic and span.
They also ensure that hygiene is maintained in school as they are responsible for keeping the water storage clean and covered and making sure that there is soap inside the washroom for washing hands after use.
All the brigades interact with their individual community members after school regularly so that their communities are benefited with their knowledge.
Interestingly, brigades change their duties every four months and each student gets the opportunity to be involved in cleaning, health activities and education by rotation.
Till now, around 8000 schools have introduced student brigades in different parts of the country.
A mother of a student brigade member of Kazipur under Sirajganj district stated that her son explained to her about the dangers of open toilets.
"My son informed me about how open toilets could spread diseases and why we should wash both our hands before eating and after using the toilet," she explained.
Her son makes sure that he washes his own hands before eating and encourages her to wash her hands with soap before serving him food, she said.
While Student Brigades are bringing about a change in the sanitation attitudes of their families and communities, there are other children who act as change makers by changing social attitudes about pressing issues such as child labour, child marriage and corporal punishment.
Adolescent and youth clubs around the country, organised by different local NGOs of respective areas, ensure the participation of young change agents who try to make their communities aware of evils of social practices as child marriage and corporal punishment.
Teenagers are trained by experts to speak on important issues with their families and communities through various media such as interactive popular theatre, whereby they stage plays in their localities, which tell how children and the society are affected because of some negative customs practiced by certain adults.
Change makers of an adolescent club in Rangpur actually saved a young girl's life from lifelong misery as they prevented a child marriage from taking place with the help of a local police, Pulok Raha, Consultant, Communication for Development of UNICEF told us over the phone.
Children, when given the right direction, motivation and guidance, don't merely bring about a change in their lives but can actually change the society in a way that the adults couldn't even dream of and this is the lesson these young change makers teach us.

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Holding of parliament helps grow leadership quality



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PANKAJ KARNAKAR
At a time when child rights face serious challenges in this country, children are participating in different activities to protect their own rights by making themselves politically and socially conscious.
Children are raising their voice before policymakers through different platforms.
For example, Child Parliament, a national level platform of children, creates opportunities for them to raise collective voices before the highest policy making body of the government, as well as NGOs, donor agencies, and civil societies.
Child Parliament began its journey in 2003. Bangladesh Shishu Academy leads the initiative with support from different organisations and donor agencies; Save the Children leads the technical support and coordination.
Bangladesh Shishu Academy has recently initiated a process to expand the Child Parliament throughout the country, which is now available for children only from 64 district headquarters. The initiative is being supported by various organizations, including UNICEF, Save the Children, Plan International, Manusher Jonno Foundation.
Child Parliament, a platform of young people aged between 12 and 18 years of age, mainly aims to create a violence-free society for children. It represents children from all strata of the society - from rural and urban areas, school going and non-school going physically challenged and children living in the slums, in the streets, working children from ethnic minority groups, and children of sex workers.
Through raising collective voice, Child Parliament exerts pressure on policymakers, NGOs, development partners and civil society members. It functions under the framework of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC).
Child Parliament consists of a total of 168 members. Among them, 128 come from all 64 districts (one girl and one boy from each district). The remaining 40 are from underprivileged sections like - gypsy community, Dalit community, indigenous, children of sex workers and so on.
The two members of every district are elected by the 11-member executive committee of National Children Task Force (NCTF) of respective district units. Later, the 168 members elect a speaker, two deputy speakers and two panel deputy speakers for the parliament.
The children during the parliament sessions can directly talk with the policymakers, raise their voice and share their problems and sufferings.
Child Parliament core committee member SM Shahriar Sifat said, "All the leaders in the child parliament are elected through a democratic process. So, we can learn about democracy and democratic systems from here."
"From here leadership capacity has grown among us. We have got several trainings that have enhanced our negotiation skills, management skills, and others," said Sifat.
Save The Children Senior Manager (Advocacy) Mir Rezaul Karim said, through this initiative children are becoming aware about their rights and political and social issues.
"Through the child parliament, children conduct advocacy at national level against violation of their rights. Children's capacity of negotiation, leadership and research activities increase through these works," said Shamsul Alam Bokul, deputy director (child rights governance) of Save The Children Bangladesh.

Politics pushes children to ruin

PANKAJ KARNAKAR
Despite decade-long campaign of rights activists, rampant use of children in violent political activities is still going on unabated across the country, in gross violation of child rights.
With growing political unrest over the last couple of months, children are often seen chanting slogans in processions of different parties, carrying sticks, often even engaging in clashes with cops in and outside Dhaka.
At least seven children were killed and several hundred injured in clashes between Jamaat-Shibir activists and law enforcers across the country during last two months, according to news reports and statistics of Ain O Salish Kendra.
Asgar Ali Limon aged around 14 was killed in Chapainawabganj on April 24, Sazzad Hossain aged around 17 killed in Cox's Bazar and Rubel aged around 13 in Thakurgaon on February 28; Shahidul Islam aged around 15 was killed at Satkania and Akmal Hossain aged around 14 in Rangpur on March 2; Rafiqul Islam aged around 12 was killed in Rajshahi on March 3 and Mahfuz Hossain aged around 15 in Sirajganj on March 4.
Jamaat-Shibir engaged children and women at the forefront of its procession, rallies, road blockade, attacks on cops and minorities communities, hartal picketing and other offences as human shield in different districts including Jhenidah, Rajshahi, Satkhira, Thakurgaon, Gaibandha and Bogra in last couple of months.
It was noticed that more than one thousand children of different Madrasas of Goresa area of Thakurgaon were engaged in atrocities by Jamaat-Shibir on March 3.
Jamaat-Shibir men in Gaibandha engaged children in frontline while attacking police information centre at Sundarganj on February 28 and vandalising the Ganojagoron Mancha at Palashbari on February 22.
On February 22, Jamaat-e-Islami and likeminded Islamist organisations unleashed violence in major cities of the country including capital Dhaka. Several hundred madrasa students were seen taking part in the violence in different districts.
On February 28, hours after announcing Saydee's death sentence, religious fanatics unleashed mayhem on Hindu communities at Rajganj of Begumganj in Noakhali. The victims and witnesses said major portion of the attackers were aged between 12 and 15. Many children were seen joining the grand rallies of Islami Andolon Bangladesh on March 29 and Hafajat-e-Islam on April 6 at the capital's Motijheel.
"I have come here with all the student of our madrasa. Our teachers have instructed us to come here," said a class-seven madrasa student from the capital's Rampura, seeking anonymity. He was carrying a placard and chanting slogans in the grand rally of Islami Andolon Bangladesh.
In the grand rally of Hefajat-e-Islam on April 6, many children were seen engaged in distributing food, carrying sticks in their hands and chanting slogans at the top of their voice.
Apart from Islamic organisations' gatherings, children are used in other programmes of different other political parties and organisations as well.

"They will be part of violence and negative political culture. When they will grow up, they will think violence is natural in politics and they will not be able to establish any healthy political culture"



Participation in media creates awareness about rights

SUSHMITA S PREETHA
Although children under 18 constitute almost half the population of the country, their voices are severely underrepresented in all forms of media. Despite a growing media industry around the world specifically aimed at children, their content continues to be decided by adults who think they are in better positions to dictate the views of children.
The media provide very limited opportunities for children to exercise both their right to participate in media and their right to express their views on issues that affect them. Adults often underestimate the knowledge, life experiences and opinions of children, refusing to acknowledge that they might have a nuanced way of approaching an issue.
"Whenever I try to express myself, I can feel the adults around me give me a look that says, 'You are a child, what do YOU know?' even though the topic at hand is something that is close to my heart," said 14-year-old Halima Sharif, an avid reader who takes an interest in politics and current affairs. "They treat me like a baby - like I am ignorant of the world around me," she added.
Issues that affect children are often delegated to the sidelines in mainstream media, with a tiny fraction of programmes and newspaper contents focusing on child rights and the plight of children.
"Even though children don't have the right to vote, they are entitled to social, political and economic rights as laid out in the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child. Our country is a signatory to the Convention," said Information Minister Hasanul Haq Inu.
He argued that mass media can play a very crucial role in ensuring child rights. "If a state or non-state actor violates a child's right, then children, through mass media, can highlight the injustice and demand that the state intervene," he opined.
He said that the media must ensure the physical participation of children and urged print media to create a special platform for child journalists to voice their concerns and opinions.
According to two surveys conducted by UNICEF in 2009 and 2011, only three per cent of the news highlighted by mainstream media deals with children, of which two per cent are accident-related and other news. Only one per cent of news deals with child rights-related issues.
There are, however, some programmes on radio, TV and print media that can serve as positive examples of child participation in media. Made of, for and by children, these programmes bring issues such as child labour, trafficking, eye teasing, violence against children, adolescence health, nutrition and sanitation and effects of environmental degradation on children to the forefront of national discourses. In addition, they also assist children develop communication skills, team work, creativity and confidence.
Shishuder Chokkie (In the eyes of children), for instance, is a one-of-a-kind programme on ATN Bangla whereby child reporters generate, write and shoot their own news stories. Six reporters from diverse backgrounds produce news items that are broadcast every Friday at 7 pm and 10 pm during primetime news.
Mohammad Hasan Mahmud Nabil, who studies in Class IX of Pagla High School in Narayanganj, said that he first wanted to be a journalist to portray the plight of children in his area. "Many children here cannot afford an education and I thought that if I become a reporter, I can highlight this issue and urge the government to intervene," he explained.
"Since he started reporting more than one and a half years ago, Nabil has reported on issues such as the condition of street children in Kamalapur Rail Station during winter, the implications of children bathing in and using the polluted water of Buriganga river, the negative impact of Doreamon cartoon on children and the importance of Book Fair.
Initiated by UNICEF, the programme is produced with the joint partnership of Children's Television Foundation of Bangladesh and ATN Bangla. A majority of the six child reporters come from underprivileged backgrounds and hence offer valuable insights on multiple forms of child exploitation.
Head of news division at ATN Bangla Z.I. Mamun believes that the news segment by children can reach a much wider audience than regular programmes on children in different channels since the latter's audience is limited.
Meanwhile, the first-ever 'Children's News Service' in Bangladesh, hello.bdnews24.com, a specialised website titled 'Hello' was launched earlier this year, featuring children and adolescent journalists aged between 10 and 17 years.
The journalists were chosen through written and oral tests from around 3,000 aspirants from 20 most deprived districts by the UNICEF to work with the staff of bdnews24.com, who conducted a workshop with the selected children.
Alif Mohammad Nur Nishan, Cox's Bazar correspondent, said, "This initiative will enable children to represent and highlight the problems that most affect children."
Amader Kotha or Our Voice is another UNICEF-supported monthly prime-time programme on Bangladesh Television that enables children from diverse backgrounds to quiz the country's prominent policymakers on issues relevant to their lives.
Children, including children on the street, working children, orphans and child journalists, get 45 minutes to ask any relevant question they want to the person being interviewed, without censorship. To encourage more policymakers to follow suit, Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina herself participated in the first episode of the show, when a 14-year-old vegetable vendor asked if her government could ensure education of children from underprivileged backgrounds.
In another episode, state minister for Labour and Employment Minister Begum Monnujan Sufian was asked what the government can do to stop violence against domestic workers and also hazardous child labour. Finance Minister Abdul Mal Abdul Muhiit was quizzed on how the government balances the revenue earned from income tax, what budgetary steps have been taken to bridge the gap between urban and rural students and why the budget is usually followed by a price hike.
The 20 children in each episode are selected from around the country, and are mostly from marginalised backgrounds. They are then given prior training at Bangladesh National Institute of Mass Communication.
Bangladesh Radio produced a show, also in association with UNICEF, called "This is Meena Speaking" where the well-known character of Meena, played by Farzana Islam and Mithu, played by Sajid Pasha, engages children in phone conversations, games, quizzes and written correspondence on a given topic pertaining to children.
Although only four episodes have been aired so far, it has already gained a huge fan following, informed Omar Sharif, the producer of the show. "The main objective of the show is to create awareness among people about child rights in a way that is easily accessible," he said.



Power of sports leads to collective social responsibility

NAIMUL KARIM
In a country where people's emotions often hang by the fragile thread of its national cricket team's performance or that of an exhilarating afternoon of football, there remains no doubt about the power of its sporting culture.
Various sectors have tried to utilise this trait; and amongst them the development field, in particular, has seen progress.
UNICEF along with its partners in recent years, have used various sporting strategies to help children residing in the rural areas and the city-streets, especially girls, break free from traditional norms that have hindered their development. "Our main aim was to address issues such as child abuse, child marriage and other traditional problems through sport," says Intiaz Ahmed, Project Official, Child Protection section.
So how does being involved in an outdoor sport help a child? Ahmed explains: "It gives a sense of status to the children in villages. It helps them develop a sense of social responsibility and also develops their thinking process. For instance, the decisions that they take on the field can help them in their real life."
The process of course was a long and tedious one. The seeds of which were sown back in 2009 after the launch of International Inspiration, a UK-based project that aims to inspire young people around the world through the power of sport.
A joint-venture with the BKSP (national sports education institute) covered the first step and helped in the assembling of coaches for different sports, who later returned to their respective regions to train children.
The next step was a bit more difficult. They had to convince parents to allow their daughters to participate in these outdoor games. "One of the major problems we faced here was persuading parents to send their girls outside. In Cox's Bazar, for instance, we had to fight hard against the age-old barriers," says Ahmed. After spending several sessions with the parents, many of them eventually lifted the bars off their girls.
The first achievement arrived in November 2010, when UNICEF Bangladesh along with other NGOs formed the Cox's Bazar female sports team, as a part of their Empowerment of Adolescents project.
The players were selected from 'Kishori Clubs', which are UNICEF-supported adolescent clubs and are run by BRAC. These clubs were created to give the youngsters a platform to discuss various issues and help them act as change-makers. The 18-member team was selected from an astonishing 1500 applicants.
The players participated in a 12-day training session, followed by six days of training at the district stadium and the result was phenomenal. It provided many with a new sense of belief.
"Sport has given me a new identity in my community," says wicketkeeper

The enthusiasm shown by the children even impressed a number of professional cricketers. Former national captain Habibul Bashar, who was involved in a cricket-related project, was one of them.



Rural children playing cricket

Sumaiya Nasrin, daughter of a rickshaw puller in Cox's Bazar and the youngest member of the team, "People respect me. I feel like I have a voice now."
Having formed a number of teams from different regions, the project was taken to the next level when a tournament was hosted in 2011. The growing change in the people's outlook was evident during the competition. "There were many elder people, including hujjurs (Islamic priests) who blessed the girls in our teams and wished them good luck," says Ahmed.
The enthusiasm shown by the children even impressed a number of professional cricketers. Former national captain Habibul Bashar, who was involved in a cricket-related project, was one of them. "It's a great step. Honestly speaking, girls get lesser opportunities and these projects are giving them a new pathway. It's good for the country's cricket development as well. Who knows, maybe one of these girls will represent Bangladesh in the future," exclaims Bashar.
The project which currently runs in 10 districts is gradually expanding and has hosted competitions in games apart from cricket as well. "Apart from volleyball and football we also try to include traditional games from different regions in the competitions so that they are kept alive," says Ahmed.
One of the other important aspects of the project includes the teaching of swimming. According to statistics, approximately 18,000 children die from drowning accidents in Bangladesh every year.
Keeping this in mind, thousands of children in the 10 districts are given 15-day training programmes in survival swimming. "It's like a school and if a student wants to graduate then he or she needs to learn the techniques of survival swimming. On the final day, a participant has to swim 25 metres and complete various other survival tasks such as CPR etc.," says Ahmed.
Apart from teaching children the norms to survive in water, Ahmed says that it also has a positive social impact. "Last year we trained 57,000 children. The village community trained 3000 more on their own. So it builds a social responsibility," he explains.
Four years in the business and the project has already seen positive results. UNICEF plans to further reach a larger audience in the near future. They say that sport is often responsible for uniting the country. UNICEF's project has taken it up a notch and has shown us that it can also provide you with a new sense of belief and self-confidence.