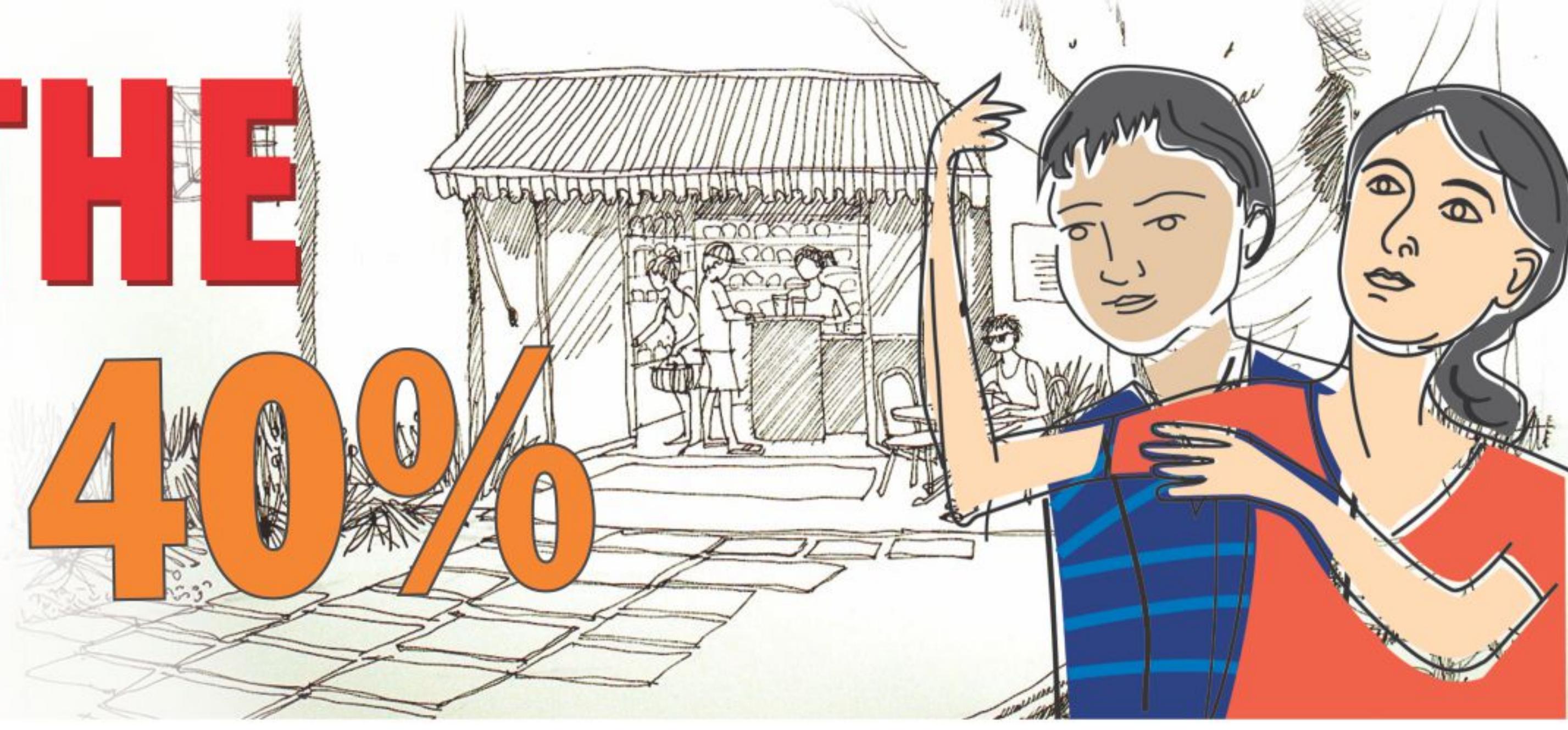


WE ARE THE voice of 40%



Educating girls



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FAARIA TASIN

WHEN taken a look at Bangladesh's achievement in the Millennium Development Goals, we can see that the country has performed a remarkable feat. The Millennium Development Goal number 2 targets to achieve universal primary education. As far as net enrolment rate (NER) in primary education is concerned, the country has performed very well with a rate of 95 percent. For girls, the NER in primary education is 98 percent (BANBEIS), implying that girls have done better than boys in terms of enrolment in primary.

Now let us observe the enrolment rate of boys and girls in secondary education which comprises classes VI to X. The NER in secondary schools for girls is also higher (47%) than boys (39%) (BANBEIS). This indicates that Bangladesh is also reaching well in Millennium Development Goal number 3 which specifies promotion of gender equality and empowering women.

Education of girls and women are associated with positive effects such as reduction in poverty and a fall in child mortality rate. Since enrolment rates of girls are outstripping that of boys in both primary and secondary education levels, we can expect that the advantages of educating girls will dribble in the economy.

However, things may not be as straightforward as these numbers suggest and deeper problems can be perceived once taken a closer look.

Although net enrolment rate for girls is high in primary education, the dropout rate stood at 39 percent (BANBEIS). This implies that 39 percent of all the girls who were enrolled in grade I are dropping out by the time they reach in class V. The situation for girls

is slightly better than that of boys as 40 percent of them are dropping out by the end of class V.

The scenario gets worse in case of secondary education. The dropout rate of girls in secondary education is 60 percent (BANBEIS). This depicts that 60 percent of girls who were enrolled in class V are dropping out of school by the time they were in class X. The dropout rate for boys however, is lower than girls and stood at 52 percent (BANBEIS). One of the key reasons for girls dropping out is early marriage. A lot of parents, especially in the rural areas feel that it is important for an adolescent girl to get married and bear a family than to complete her education. There is also a practice in rural Bangladesh that as a girl gets older, a higher dowry is realised from her family in order to compensate for her rising age.

Another important issue of inclusiveness of girls in education is that contrary to the overall and general trend of girls' enrolment in schools being higher than that of boys, the enrolment of girls with special needs is significantly lower than boys, shows UNICEF report on Quality Primary Education in Bangladesh.

A new report by UNESCO on education depicts that education helps to save children's lives. Education helps women recognise early signs of illness, seek advice and act on it. If all women in poor countries completed primary education, child mortality would drop by a sixth. If they all had a secondary education, child mortality would be halved.

While celebrating the country's feat in enrolment of girls and gender equality, we should also remember the challenges that exist. Taking a girl to school is a first step but we must also ensure that girls stay in school, learn and complete their education. Only then can we reap the full advantages of educating girls and empowering women.

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The real scenario of enrolment

MASUM BILLAH

UNICEF, the Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics and the Bangladesh Institute of Development Studies have recently launched the Child Equity Atlas: Pockets of Social Deprivation. The report reveals that half of the country's school-aged children are not enrolled in any school. The Bangladesh Primary Education Annual Sector Performance Report and the Bangladesh Bureau of Educational Information and Statistics Report 2012 show that 1.91 crore children aged 6-17 are not receiving any schooling. This amounts to 46 percent of the total population of children in this age group, according to Population & Housing Census 2011. These survey results should be taken seriously by the government which so often boasts of achieving almost 100 percent enrolment at the primary level (Children aged 6-10 years).

The situation for secondary school enrolment is far worse. The BANBEIS survey showed that 56 percent of the 1.6 crore children in the 11-15 years age group and 85 percent of the total 69 lakh children aged 16-17 years are not enrolled. The Campaign for popular Education Executive Director, Rasheda K Choudhury told "in reality the number of children who do not go to school is higher than even the survey figures".

In our experience we observe that there are four categories of children -- such as children with disabilities, poor and street children, indigenous and those from remote areas such as haor areas -- who are not part of primary and secondary school education. "Many children do not go to school for the lack of schools as there are many villages in the country without either any primary or secondary schools," opined Rasheda K Choudhury.

The real scenario of enrolment shows that achieving education for all is still a big challenge for Bangladesh.



SHAMSUDDOZA SAJEN

RUMA spends much of her time taking care of the household chores as her mother goes out for work early in the morning. She stops going to school because it is far away from her home and her mother does not feel safe to allow her in the busy streets alone.

"I used to go to school in our village, but here in Dhaka it is no more possible. However, I am also quite grown up now. In the slum, people give unusual looks and make comments which frightens me. I feel suffocated living confined whole day in this shabby shack," said Ruma, a twelve-year-old girl of Hazaribagh slum area in Dhaka.

This is the story of thousands of girl children living in slums. Unfortunately, there is no statistics to put a number on them who are considered as the most vulnerable in the society. We do little care for their distress.

A girl child is the first casualty of a slum. She is born in a sprawl of overcrowded shacks or tenement buildings, and start life on poverty's front line. Hard living conditions thrust her prematurely into adult responsibilities and rob her of the learning processes and joys of childhood. Due to socio-economic factors incidents of neglect, abuse and deprivation incidents are also very common to her life.

Poor rural families migrate to cities seeking greater opportunity. But living in slum, urban advantage of better access remains a myth. Slum families have to sacrifice the education of their children, particularly girls, for meeting the bare minimum costs of food, rent and transport.

Teenage girls in slums very often fall victim to sexual harassment, which leads to stop their going to school or work and compell their helpless parents to marry them off at a tender age.

A baseline study undertaken by ICDDR,B and Population Council in the slums of Mohakhali, Mohammadpur and Jatrabari reveals high rate of child marriage and consistent violation of sexual

and reproductive rights of the girls.

A slum girl gets little support from her family against this vulnerability. Another ICDDR,B study titled 'Violence against Unmarried Adolescent Girls in Dhaka Slums' shows that parents often mistrust and blame girls inappropriately when girls report sexual harassment on the streets.

The UNICEF report titled 'The State of the World's Children-2012' found that there are five sorts of deprivations the slum children face: access to improved water, access to improved sanitation,

KHABARSOUTHASIA



security of tenure, durability of housing and sufficient living area. Girl children are the worst sufferers of these deprivations.

The poor sanitary condition along with poor water quality is a serious health risk for girl children. The poor condition makes them vulnerable to various types of infections and water borne diseases, particularly adolescents. Generally health infrastructure is very poor in slum areas, so arrangements for adolescent girls' access to

reproductive health services is almost non-existent.

In the dense urban situation it is difficult to find place for private toilet. So often there are a common toilet shared by many slum dwellers with very little privacy. This exposed latrine is a nagging privacy issue for grown up girls.

While living in slum, many girls have boldly come forward to change their world. Dolly Akhtar is one of them. Dolly and her friends have encouraged and sensitised their neighbour about wash-



ing hands after defecation and before eating, using sanitary latrines and drinking only clean, covered water. Their efforts result in improved hygiene behaviours and new latrines in the neighbourhood. Boosted with spirit of remarkable success now they are taking on other issues such child marriage. We need more Dollys. They just need a positive environment to grow to their full potential.

Because I am a girl!

SHEGUFTA YASMIN

FOR a women the world is of inequality. This is true worldwide. This is true in every walk of her life, such as access to education, nutrition, legal rights, medical care, and protection from discrimination, violence and so on.

It begins from the very birth day she steps into the patriarch world. A girl child is taught in her very childhood that 'you are a girl, so you have to maintain this and that rules'. When she grows up she suffers eve-teasing, sexual harassment in and outside of the house. She breaths in fear, lives in tears, a life of gender discrimination, a life without rights.

That's why a sense of equality should be first dreamt and felt by a girl child. She should be given the scope of meaningful participation in building her own world which is free of discrimination and violence and promotes and protects full and effective enjoyment of a human life.

The fulfilment of girls' right to education is first and foremost requirement. This is a powerful means of converting not only a girl's life but also that of her whole family. It determines development, health, poverty reduction and a tendency to social change.

Only education can give a girl independence in her life. It does not mean only traditional education; it can be any education that can change a her life.

Empowering girls requires their active participation in decision-making processes and the active support and engagement of their parents, legal guardians, families and care providers, as well as boys and men and the wider community.

Many girls, particularly the most marginalised, continue to be deprived of this basic right. Girls in many countries are still unable to attend school and complete their education due to safety-related as well as financial, institutional and cultural barriers.

For many of them, the family thinks that sending the girl to school deprives the home of an income and provides her an opportunity to escape household tasks. Society must play a proactive role in saving the girl child from such damaging prejudices.

"Education is the most powerful weapon which you can use to change the world", said Nelson Mandela. We have observed the struggle of Malala and how, bracing mayhem in Swat, she advocated for girls' education. Now her struggle becomes a symbol for the fight for education across



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tions. Employers' mind changing process is very slow. If nationwide people from all walks of life take part in educating them, a revolution will occur.

This is one section's picture. Those who belong to middle or upper class families also sometimes have to face the brutal bites of social dogma. Consciously or unconsciously most of the families show gender inequality towards their children. We have to remember, "Daughters are flowers that are forever in bloom." But instead of blooming they lose shine at the very early stages of life. Truly, it is nipping in the bud.

If a girl is always compelled to think "I cannot do this or that because I am a girl", it is a failure of our society. The must be a call "Save the future mothers and grandmothers. Save Girls!"

The greatest challenge is: how to bring in a revolution of heart, a revolution which has to start with each one of us".

Girl children in slums

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