



# We want to Be HEARD

## FOLLOW-UP

### A world of fear

STAFF CORRESPONDENT

**O**N October 1, 2013 a report came out in *The Daily Star* titled "Peril of being a girl child". The report brought out the still existent perils of medieval mindset in our society the girl child faces. A young woman named China Akther helplessly took refuge at the house of her elder brother to save herself and her four-year-old daughter from the child's father who allegedly killed their three-month-old daughter on September 14, 2013.

On September 16, China filed a case with Saidpur police station accusing her husband Rabiul of stealing and killing their three-month-old daughter.

China alleged that after filing of the case, her husband over mobile phone threatened to make her childless by killing the other daughter. Feeling unsafe, she took shelter at her elder brother's house at Chawra village.



**China Akhtar, who took refuge at the house of her elder brother Taiyeb Ali in Saidpur of Pirojpur district, poses with first daughter Riva. Photo: Star**

In the meantime, Rabiul also filed a case against China accusing her of the murder of their child. Family members of China Akther told that Rabiul filed the case to intimidate China Akther further and delay his arrest.

Unfortunately, we have to say this is one of many stories showing how unsafe our society is for a girl child.

This follow up is prepared with the help of our Nilphamari correspondent.

AMENA ALAM

**L**IKE many children of the 90's, Meena has been a happy part of my childhood. I remember vividly, during my kindergarten days, what Meena meant to me, how the title song, "Ami baba-maer shot o adorermeye; Ami boro hoi shokoler bhalobasha niye; Amar duu chokhey onek shopno thake..." used to motivate me, used to make me realise how precious I am to my parents. As if every message of Meena was only meant for me.

The character Meena is a girl child of age 9 and she continues to be ever young. This year on September 24, she turned 21. The first episode of Meena series, "Count your Chickens," was telecast on BTV in December 1992. Mostofa Monwar, Shishir Bhattacharjya and other Bangladeshi artists were involved in its innovation; a number of researches, drawings of characters, interviews and voice-selection processes were carried out to dig up the Meena, we fell in love with. Even today children feel the same way about Meena like the children of the 90s.

Meena has become a popular tool of social change because of her friendliness, curiosity on social concerns and effort to make lives better for people around her, starting from her own family. From her we get many positive perceptual inspirations on how a girl child can contribute to serve for her own family as well can lead to the entire community's wellbeing. Her character is a beautiful reflection of that very idea, "When you educate a girl, a mother, you educate the entire generation!"

Watching her series, we have also got to learn the joy of participation in the school, which is an essential element to bring about children's mental expansion and expression. In the episode "Count your Chickens," Meena has demonstrated to us the necessity of seeking education where Meena's father refused to send her to school and that makes Meena sad; so she used to send Mithu (her parrot) to go to the school and learn some lessons for her and then Mithu finally taught her counting.

One morning, she counted her chickens and then she found out that one of her chickens was missing. That helped her family find the missing chicken and the family also got convinced about the importance of seeking primary education. Meena's father then understood that if he sends Meena to school, she can help better in everyday household works. So, here lies an example of why a girl child deserves education.

It motivates children, even now, to love their books, teachers, studies, mates, colours and everything about school. Children who had never been to school before, this episode drives their spirit into the school and makes them crave for seeking education!

Besides, for the past 21 years, other episodes of Meena have been tutoring children about maintaining basic hygiene like washing hands with soap before having meals and using proper sanitary

## Meena mania!



latrines, equal distribution of food between boys and girls as both have the same rights of care from their parents, say-No-to-dowry, etc.

Meena carries the challenges faced by girl children in different series that reflect the contemporary dilemma of most Bangladeshi girls.

Today, she is not only a household name in Bangladesh; she has become a native girl of other South Asian SAARC countries: Bhutan, India, Nepal, Pakistan and Sri Lanka. She is recognised under the banner of UNICEF.

UNICEF, through Meena, has successfully reached both the rural and urban audience. Now, it should sit with the press, TV and radio stations to discuss the production of more new Meena-series in order to reach the contemporary crisis of the urban society today.

A girl child is a daughter, a future mother, an independent flag of change herself. She is the mirror, the primary teacher, of the society! Perhaps that is what the cartoon character Meena and girls/women like her stand for. Even after growing older, now, Meena is still a name in my blood as it reminds me how much goodness and motivation I had absorbed from her.

The writer is Editorial Assistant at *The Daily Star*.

### Less than human

TAMANNA KHAN

**O**N September 22, a girl almost akin to a skeleton was found riddled with injuries near a dustbin in the capital's DOHS Baridhara. She was Aduri, an 11-year-old child; but she had the profession of domestic help attached to her profile.

The nation was horrified when the cruel story behind Aduri's torture came out, but I shrank into myself as memories that were locked away deep inside began to return. It was the dark brown hands of a child with burnt marks displaying the pink of her flesh inside -- her punishment for being greedy and kleptomaniac.

Her name was Jotsna meaning moonlight. Her complexion was on the other hand just the opposite. Perhaps to her parents, her birth was like the moonlight that brightens up poor huts in remote Bangladeshi villages on dark nights.

However, Jotsna's parents unable to provide her with three meals a day had no choice but to send her away to the capital to earn a livelihood. At her employer's place she received her meal timely but the eyes which were unaccustomed to food craved for more. Caught into the act of stealing, she was tried in the court of her employer and punished in line with Middle Eastern tradition. One hot iron spatula mark for each day she stole. Then one day she vanished.

To this day, I do not know what happened to Jotsna; whether she was ever found by a kind-hearted soul or whether her burn injuries received treatment. Her employer never had to answer to the law, but things fortunately changed for the better in that household. But such a change in one home was not enough. Decades later, I find Nusrat Jahan Nodi, using the same methods to teach her domestic help, Aduri, a lesson.

I was not consoled knowing Nodi was sent behind bars for her misdeed as I have like many others in Bangladesh learned how people like Nodi always escape through the loopholes of law. Besides, punishing a single Nodi would not solve



**Aduri, who was allegedly tortured by her employer and found unconscious in a severely malnourished state and riddled with injuries and scars near a dustbin in the capital's DOHS Baridhara on September 23.**

the compassion crisis we, as civilised humans, have been suffering for ages.

According to Walk Free Foundation's Global Slavery Index, approximately 29.8 million people are living in conditions of modern slavery across the world, among them 0.3 million exist in Bangladesh. A person is a victim of modern slavery when s/he is forced to work through mental or physical threat, owned or controlled by the employer through mental or physical abuse,

dehumanised or treated as commodity, physically constrained or freedom of movement restricted.

Life of a domestic help in Bangladesh matches with almost every criteria of modern slavery. They are forced to work with threats of physical torture, many do not have a say about the food or clothing they are given, most of them are not allowed to go out of the house where they work and the more unfortunate ones do not even receive a salary. Majority of the house-helps in Bangladesh are children, particularly girl children, making matters worse since as children they often do not have a voice in choosing their employers and as girl they often become victim of sexual harassment. Besides, their wages are also taken away by their guardians leaving them totally dependent on their masters.

Last year, I watched 'The Help', a 2011 American film which showed how a few white people helped change the attitude towards the African American maids who worked at their homes. The film was based on the 1960s American society still influenced by the prejudices of slavery. The same condition now exists in Bangladesh. We use different utensils, give our domestic helps remnants of our food and lock them up at homes neither do we allow them to sit with us at the dinner table and so on. Unlike the African American maids, our domestic helps are not from a different ethnic, racial or religious background. Their only fault is they belong to the lowest quintile of the society haunted by the curse of poverty and lack of education.

Though rights activists have been urging for a specific law protecting the rights of domestic workers no steps have been taken so far. However, enactment of a law or its implementation alone would not help change the situation as long as we do not change our attitude and perception towards these people who we call 'servants' -- until we give them with dignity and consider them as humans.

The writer is Staff Correspondent, *The Daily Star*.

### Too young to bear the burden



JAMIL MAHMUD

**A**CCORDING to a joint report released by ILO and Unicef in 2006, around 4 lakh children are involved in domestic works in Bangladesh.

Of them, 80 percent are girls and they work up to 16 hours a day. Moreover, 99 percent of domestic helps work seven days in a week.

Yet domestic work is not being recognised as one of the worst forms of child labour in the government's booklet that consists of 38 other risky occupations country's children are involved in.

ILO recognises "hazardous work" as "labour that jeopardises the physical, mental or moral well-being of a child, either because of its nature or because of the conditions in which it is carried out."

Whilst child labour takes many different forms, International Labour Organisation (ILO) prioritises to eliminate without delay the worst forms of child labour as defined by Article 3 of its Convention on the Worst Forms of Child Labour No. 182.

Gita Chakraborty, senior deputy director of Child Rights Unit at ASK, said although domestic work is not as risky as those of in chemical factories and tanneries, it should be stopped for the sake of children's safe future.

Chakraborty said ASK has prepared a bill to create a bar for recruiting children below 12-year as domestic helps and placed the bill to the law ministry last year.

After visiting Aduri at Dhaka Medical College Hospital, State Minister for the Ministry of Women and Children Affairs Meher Afrozeh Chumki said the girl would never have to work as a domestic help again to feed herself and would be rehabilitated in future.

While such words from a policymaker uplift mass conscience and are worth appreciation, works have to be done in larger scale for the betterment of all children including those of domestic workers.

The writer is Staff Correspondent, *The Daily Star*.

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