



Promoting Child Rights



Political promises made to children in election manifestoes

JAMIL MAHMUD

BOTH Awami League (AL) and Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP), the leading political parties in the country, declared several points regarding women and children development in their 2008 and 2001 election manifestoes.

In the 2008 manifesto, AL chalked out issues to develop in sectors like health and family welfare, empowerment of women, welfare of children and juvenile as well as sports and culture.

The party which formed the government with the manifesto promised to work in order to ensure proper nutrition to children and mothers.

AL also stated to update the population policy and take measures to ensure birth control and reproductive health care.

In order to ensure women empowerment and equality in rights and opportunities, the Women Development Policy formulated by Awami League in 1997 will be revived, the manifesto noted.

For the children and juvenile welfare, the political party promised to work on child labour issues.

The manifesto reads:

Child labour will be gradually abolished in all sectors. Use of children in political and other activities through coercion or enticement will be prohibited. In line with the UN convention on children rights, adequate measures will be taken for developing their physical and mental capacity and for their nutrition and entertainment.

For mental and physical developments of the children, adolescent and young, AL promised to make sports and exercise compulsory at all education institutions.

In the manifesto, AL also set milestones for women and children developments.

It said to achieve 100 percent student enrolment at primary level within 2010. It also included achieving infant mortality rate com-

ing down at 15 from 54 per thousand and reducing maternal death rate at 1.5 percent from 3.8 percent within 2021.

BNP Election Manifesto 2008

The BNP manifesto for the ninth Parliamentary election consisted of several points related to children and women developments. If the party achieve power it would ensure that in next five years no children are remaining away from school.

BNP promised to take effective measures to increase women's participation at policy making level, empowerment and dignity.

They would give priority in recruiting women at different professions and facilitate with loans at small interest for those women who are involved in entrepreneurship and self employment.

Eligible women from rural areas would be given priority in recruiting employees at public services for rural level.

The party will take extensive programmes to reduce children and women trafficking, eliminate dowry system and acid violence from the society.

BNP manifesto reads that maternal and child deaths will be minimised significantly, while children will be prevented from being abused in political activities.

Proper initiatives regarding women's participation in Parliament and other sectors will be taken.

Effective programmes will be launched to stop child labour, especially hazardous jobs children involved in. For children's proper physical and mental growth, required sports equipment will be provided in educational institutions.

AL Election Manifesto 2001

AL stated several points regarding women empowerment and child rights in its 2001 election manifesto.

The party noted:

In society and elsewhere in the state, policy and implementation programmes taken earlier by Awami League to establish equal rights, opportunity and dignity of women will continue.

Women's participation in national development programmes and at policy making level

will be ensured.

To abolish gender inequality as well as



empower women, new plans will be taken in lines with the UN declaration and Beijing forum for women.

Reserved seats in the Parliament would be increased to 60. Constituency for a reserved seat would consist of five regular constituencies, while women MPs will earn seats through direction election.

AL would give priority women education. It would take stern action to stop violence against women as well as children and women trafficking.

More dormitories for working women would be built in district headquarters.

As per UN treaty for child rights, necessary steps will be taken in the country to save child rights and building up them as future citizens.

For poor and destitute children, child welfare board will be constituted and free education will be provided.

BNP Election Manifesto 2001

Prosperous future of the country lies beneath the development of the children, BNP stated in its 2001 election manifesto.

The party, which won the election with the manifesto, vowed to ensure a safe society for children where they would grow up healthy and literate.

The party articulated some points in the manifesto:

It said to initiate and further strengthen the vaccination programme for children. Extensive programme will be launched to reduce child mortality.

BNP also promised to launch extensive programmes to reduce maternal deaths.

It wanted to enhance programmes regarding ensuring nutrition for children. BNP wanted to take steps to ensure primary education for all children.

The manifesto articulates steps regarding abolishing child labour from the country.

In this chord, initiatives for welfare of working, street, poor children as well as children with disabilities will be taken.

All kinds of laws against child abuse and for welfare will be formulated and implemented properly.

Pushing child safety and education to the edge



Children fall victim to the nonchalance of the political parties.

PHOTO: PALASH KHAN

ZYMA ISLAM

At least one child died because of the political violence in the 60-hour hartal held from October 27 to October 29.

Fourteen year old Mohammad Arzu fell victim to a bout of violence between Awami League and BNP factions in Chandpur.

Five other minors were injured in clashes during the same hartal all over the country - Sohail Miah, 8, was targeted by a crude bomb while picking flowers from a roadside shrub in Bogura; Rahima Akhter, 9, was caught in a blast while playing in a field in Jurain in the capital, while Rony, 7, and Milton, 8, of Bogura, and Sumon, 14, of Jhalakathi, picked up unexplodable bomb out of curiosity which blasted on touch.

All of these children were blossoming in a display of their childhood when they were attacked - they were playing, picking flowers or being curious about their surroundings.

These are perhaps some of the most direct ways of how children fall victim to the nonchalance of the political parties. Another,

rather indirect way was pointed out by a little invalid boy begging on a lakeside bridge in Dhanmondi.

"Why do I need to know what is going on in politics," said eight year old Selim, who bears stumps on all four of his limbs, "all I know is that no one is making sure I have food in my stomach."

The invalid eight year old's wisdom points out that political on-goings fail to give importance to what really matters - whether there is a little invalid boy rolling in roadside filth begging a few grains of rice, or children are going hungry, going uneducated, dying of sicknesses.

Political mayhem severely disrupts the education of children with schools staying closed, to be made up later with extra classes during weekends.

Aref, studying in class three in a private school in Dhanmondi complained to this correspondent that going to school during weekends annoys him.

On a hartal day, thirteen-year old Tithi got out of a coaching centre in Farmgate in the

capital while her mother tried to hail a rickshaw.

Tithi told this correspondent that she lives near the Mirpur zoo, but had to make a long, arduous journey to Farmgate and return by

rickshaw because her Junior Secondary Examination (JSC) is coming up.

"We have to change rickshaws thrice during the journey, and I am very tired by the time I get home," said Tithi.

"Political on-goings fail to give importance to what really matters - whether there is a little invalid boy rolling in roadside filth begging a few grains of rice, or children are going hungry, going uneducated, dying of sicknesses."



Political mayhem severely disrupts the education of children with schools staying closed.

PHOTO: SK ENAMUL HAQ

It's crime to use children as political shield



TAMANNA KHAN

THE ruling Awami League (AL) is working on its manifesto for the 10th national parliamentary election. Nooh-ul-Alam Lenin, member of AL presidium, the highest policy making body of the ruling party, told The Daily Star that the party has always treated children's issues with utmost importance since children are the future of the nation.

Lenin who was involved in preparing AL's manifesto in 2001 and 2008, said that they have not finalised the points related to child rights in their current manifesto. Therefore, different human rights organisations, social bodies and

Nooh-ul-Alam Lenin, Member, AL Presidium

civil society members are welcome to send their suggestion to the party.

"If we find the suggestions relevant, feasible and not utopian, we would definitely try to incorporate those in our manifesto," he added.

Referring to AL's 2008 manifesto, Lenin said his party is yet to finalise the priority issues for its next term if

"It is very important that we ensure an environment so that children experience sound physical and mental health."

voted to power again.

However, he said AL will continue those programmes which led to achievements in millennium development goals during AL's regime including reduction in maternal and infant mortality and increase in school enrollment.

"It is very important that we ensure

an environment so that children experience sound physical and mental health," he said, adding how the state through its food, nutrition, health and education programmes should nurture the future nation-builders.

"To create an intellectual society for our nation in future, we should provide our children with a science-oriented education, healthy entertainment facilities and lessons on accurate history," said Lenin.

Regarding children's security and abuse of children in politics, he said that all political parties should come forward to stop this. Lenin referred to a programme organised by a human rights organisation recently in the capital where the opposition Bangladesh Nationalist Party was also present. "We criticised how it is a crime to use children as political shield."

"There are many political parties that force children to participate in rallies," Lenin said. "We must come out of this culture."

The Awami League policymaker said his party's vision is to ascertain that children, the assets of the nation, acquire a long and healthy life and enjoy a happy childhood.



Children used for political violence.

FILE PHOTO: STAR

Children's issues occupy backseat in election manifestoes



AKRAM HOSEN

NONE of the political parties in Bangladesh, including the leftists, keep children on their mind when they design their manifestos, said noted educationist Rasheda K Chowdhury.

As the political manifestos are targeted towards the voters, who are grownups, issues of protecting child rights remain absent in those, she said.

"The parties tend to fail to see that the children of today will be voters once they are 18-years-old. In fact, they are the future leaders. So, the political parties will eventually gain if they focus on the development of children," said the former adviser to an interim caretaker government in an interview with The Daily Star.

Even though the leftist parties claim to be inclusive and progressive, the issues of child rights are never prioritised in their manifestos.

Rasheda K Chowdhury, Educationist

tos, she said.

Although the parties talk about development agendas like reducing child and maternal mortality, they never focus on creating child-friendly schools, curriculum and environment, she said.

For some parties, she said, the focus on children can be summed up in a single sentence: Children will

breached, she said. "The parties do not only involve children in their programmes but make the underprivileged children risk their lives for their programmes."

Commenting on how political programmes harm education, she said, "People must force the parties into promising that they will never hold programmes that can harm educational environment."

Programmes like hartal do much harm to the educational institutions, especially schools, she said. "Students of primary schools do not get enough contact hours with their teachers anyway."

"Due to frequent hartals children get even fewer learning hours in schools," she said.

She thinks that the parties should exempt schools and other educational institutions from hartal.

Citing the example of Nepal, she said, political parties always keep educational institutions out of conflict by declaring them as "peace zones".

Emphasising on giving due importance to child rights, she said, "Issues of health and education are mentioned as development agenda in the manifestos, but they should be regarded as rights."

First of all, the leaders themselves must understand what child rights are. If they are to bring about a real change, they must believe in the cause.

Moreover, the promises that are made by the parties are often

It's state's responsibility to protect children from political violence



TAMANNA KHAN

BANGLADESH Nationalist Party (BNP), the main opposition political party of the current term, is busy with its struggle to ensure election under a non-partisan caretaker government, rather than preparing its election manifesto.

Talking to The Daily Star at his party office in Nayapalton, BNP joint secretary general Ruhul Kabir Rizvi said, "Since we are amidst a struggle we have not started working on the manifesto as yet."

However, he said, once the issue of how the 10th general election would be held is resolved, BNP policymakers would start preparing the manifesto where child rights would be given the utmost priority.

Rizvi claimed that the programmes BNP implemented during their terms 1991-1995 and 2001-2006 targeting women and children helped Bangladesh reach the related development goals for which the country received much accolade worldwide.

He referred to Pakistani economist and founder of UNDP's Human Development Report (HDR) Dr Mahbub ul Haq's comment that Bangladesh ranks top among the South Asian countries in terms of women employment and child nutrition.

"The action plan we took to prevent drop-outs in schools were very

Ruhul Kabir Rizvi, Joint Secretary General, BNP

successful," he said giving example of how food incentive programmes in schools helped reduce drop-outs.

He also claimed that the maternal mortality rate came down because of the initiatives and steps BNP took during its reign. "Because of reduced maternal mortality, the chance that children have a healthy life is ensured," he said.

"Can you imagine that we do not have any toy industry in this country," he said, adding, "We have to import most toys from countries like China. The state should ensure that inexpensive toys reach children. We need to address these issues."

Regarding security of children, he said that abuse of children inside and outside home needs to be dealt with strongly. "It is the responsibility of state to protect everyone especially children from political violence."

In reply to whether opposition also has a role in ensuring child security, he said it is a matter of collective social responsibility to ensure that every child, irrespective of their socio-economic background enjoys a secured and healthy childhood.

"However, we need to ensure that the child grows up in such an environment that makes him/her a responsible and conscious citizen," he added.



Whither protection?

FILE PHOTO: AFP

Rural-urban equity in growth can emphasise child rights



TAMANNA KHAN

ABM Ruhul Amin Howlader, secretary general of Jatiyo Party (JP), shared some of the points related to child rights, which are likely to appear in the election manifesto of the party.

An ally of the ruling 14-party alliance, JP has formed a committee headed by commerce minister GM Kader to prepare their election manifesto which would detail out the matter, he said.

Howlader said they would take steps to ensure that all children, orphan or with parents, receive all kinds of facilities that would help them grow up as good citizens. "It will be the government's responsibility to ascertain security of children's life and their future."

"Our manifesto would focus on points prioritising how we could maximise our contribution for children and protect their interest," he

ABM Ruhul Amin Howlader, Secretary General, JP

added.

Howlader said things have changed globally a lot since Jatiyo Party was in power. So, they will take into consideration the present demands and aspirations of the children, many of who would soon turn into voters.

The experts and policy makers of our party would take note of the

urbanisation that is widening the gap between rich and poor. Howlader said we can reduce discrimination only if we start working towards development from grassroots level.

"Standard of living is not same in urban and rural areas. People do not receive equal privileges," he said, adding that the evils of urbanisation can be prevented by ensuring all kinds of facilities in the villages across Bangladesh.

Referring to the village development projects during Hussien Muhammad Ershad's reign, Howlader described how creation of upazillas and construction of roads throughout the country had helped in the development of rural Bangladesh.

Such grassroots level development is necessary for elimination of urban-rural discrimination, he observed.

If all facilities necessary for a better standard of living, that are found in urban areas can be made available in villages then rural people would not need to migrate to cities, he said.

In fact, a child growing up in a village would get a better environment in terms of greenery and space if we can ensure all the facilities as that of a city, Howlader opined.

Besides rural development to accelerate equity-based growth, Howlader said JP would also emphasise on education, food and health issues of children.