

Reversing trend on child marriage

Accord top priority to it

THE recently concluded Bangladesh Girl Summit jointly organized by the Ministry of Women and Children Affairs, BRAC and DFID hoped to provide a platform where children and adolescent activists can play a proactive role in the prevention of child marriages. The summit, the first of its kind to be organized in the country brought together diverse viewpoints on how best to combat the age-old practice of parents marrying off their children before they finish secondary schooling.

What has been brought to light is that the average girl who is able to study beyond S.S.C. has a higher possibility of remaining unmarried than the girl child who succumbs to peer pressure for early marriage. Education remains the single most important bulwark against child marriage. Whilst societal beliefs in rural areas may still favour child marriage as a safeguard against perceived harm befalling girl children, what parents fail to gauge is the harm it does to the natural growth of the child, both physical and psychological. And their situation is only exacerbated by the onset of pregnancy at an early age.

In an effort to combat the harmful practice of child and forced marriage, the government has partnered with BRAC and DFID to change set notions of girls being liabilities, rather than assets to the nation. No form of intervention is as effective as primary education for girls which has been a focus for both state and non-state actor interventions in Bangladesh.

Highway robbery apparition

Police patrolling laxity underlined

A heart-rending incident of banditry and carnage took place at Madhukali point under Faridpur district on the Dhaka-Jessore highway at the wee hours of night into Sunday. A felled tree had been placed across the road forcing three vehicles to stop near the Ariakandi bridge as the dacoits with arms swooped on one of them. They robbed passengers of their money as they hacked their way out critically injuring several passengers. They carried out the mayhem completely unchallenged.

In such a scary situation, it was too much to expect that armless passengers and operators of the other vehicles could have resisted it but they didn't even try. That basically brings into focus the role of highway police and that of local Thana personnel. Reports have it that this is the third dacoity in a series of robberies taking place in quick succession with similar modus operandi. A log was used in blocking the passage and making a ruthless job of it in each case. Police maintained no vigil on the ground, had no information about the barricade to avert the gruesome tragedy. And, they only appeared after the incident.

Their primary job is to keep the highways safe by planned and rotational patrolling aided by human intelligence. Of course, they will lend a hand in carrying the wounded to hospitals which they have done with promptitude. But they have to bear in mind that they are fundamentally responsible to prevent crimes, especially on the highways at night.

PM's UAE visit: Mixed outcome



HUMAYUN KABIR

IN one word the outcome of the visit of our PM to the UAE can be stated as mixed. In terms of the overall gain it would be fair to suggest that the host has gained quite a bit more than the guest. Our main concern, opening and expanding of the labour market has apparently not been addressed immediately.

For instance UAE has a substantive gain which is ensuring a piece of land for its embassy in Dhaka, and also for its own convenience signing the agreement on transfer of sentenced prisoners, which is a kind of extradition treaty. This particular issue may create some problems, in the sense that because of the difference in the two countries' legal system. It may not be possible to implement the penalty awarded in the UAE in our country, and which is awarded under the Sharia laws.

What remains inconclusive is the opening of UAE labour market for our expatriate workers. There is nothing definitive that holds out any prospect of change in the current visa regime vis a vis Bangladesh by UAE, which means that the prospect of sending Bangladeshi labour to UAE in the near future will continue to remain on hold. Bangladesh should have been more proactively engaged in opening the labour market.

However, a redeeming feature of the deals is the one on the accord by the two countries to jointly fight terrorism and smuggling of arms and drugs besides human trafficking.

The writer is a former Ambassador.

The 90/10 sky over our head

KNOT SO TRUE
RUBANA HUQ

THE discourse on empowerment has been going on for too long a time. Some say, we are getting there; some say we are far from even reaching the first bend on the first road; some even say that we'll never make it. Some openly rebel and are courageous enough to defy house rules; some play the good wife; and some just spend their entire lives balancing between what is and what appears to be. For most women in Bangladesh, the real is often surreal.

There are three stories that reached my desk last week. All three had appealed for help. Unable to cope with their debts, all of them have turned to the organization for cash assistance. Selina, a 22 year-old sewing operator from Jamalpur, had a story to share. She had always been a steady student, but she had a typhoid attack when she was appearing for her HSC exams. Her parents declared that since she couldn't sit for her exams, she would not be given one more chance and that it was best to marry her off to the relatively stable businessman from their tiny village. That "businessman" still needed dowry of Taka twenty thousand. After a year, Selina came back home with her little one, the girl child in a family that only had space for a son. Little Laila now lives with her grandmother and Selina now lives in a women's hostel and works for one of the factories in Khilkhet. The second protagonist, Fatema from Mirzapur was married off to a man at 18. She was a young bride and an instant mother to four stepchildren without any prior knowledge. Fatema was tortured and was sent back home after she became a mother of two children. The daughter accompanied Fatema back to her parent's home while the son was admitted to Madrasa...just because it offered free education. The third letter started with an unusual line: "Ami photo family-r boro meye" meaning that Sakhina was the oldest daughter of her father's second wife. The first wife's family is labeled as the "senior" family while the second one lacks seniority and is termed as the "junior" one. This senior yet junior Sakhina of ours is today cash strapped as none of the offspring of her father earn even a dime. So our Sakhina has 4 other stepsiblings to take care of along with her own younger sister. All three of the letters appeal for loans to be paid off in the next three years.

Stories like this pour on and make great individual plots for a collection. Unfortunately editing these stories is challenging as most of them cannot be axed or twisted to fit our perspectives or purpose. All of them make a great collage of abuse, but are they enough for a reality check?

WHO ran a survey on 2400 men out of which, 89% rural men and 83% of urban men had said that it was perfectly normal to "mildly" hit their wives as per our religion. UNFPA's survey conducted on 12600 women revealed that 87% of them faced abuse. Out of the abused women, 65% faced physical torture, 53% had mental anguish, 36% was confronted by general violence and 42% had disturbing environment at home. A recent study undertaken by a private think-tank CPD along with Manusher Jonno Foundation has revealed that the estimated value of women's unpaid works could be 2.5 to 2.9 times higher than the income of

women received from paid services in FY2013-14.

Contribution of women has always been an unaccounted story. Statistics of women are always hard to access. Yet abusing women has been the easiest. In the last two weeks, four school going girls have been raped in Nilphamari, Thakurgaon, Sirajganj and Pirojpur. In Nilphamari again, a woman who was out with her husband was violated in presence of her partner. In Tangail, a mother along with her three daughters were set on fire and killed.

Having a Janet Yellen or a Christine Lagarde does not change our reality, whether it is in Bangladesh or beyond Asia. Neither does it change the fact that women's participation in the world has been the same for the last two decades, nor does it impact the invisible, underappreciated world of the second sex. In spite of the increase in fertility rates, consumer spending or work force participation, only 25% of women in the European union hold top positions in business; only 4% of women lead the leading 500 companies surveyed within 2008-2012 by Standard and Poor and almost 23.6% women in the US face domestic violence. In spite of direct contribution to the economic landscape, the Sub-Saharan women who account for more than 80% of the agricultural work, receives less than 10% access to credit. Yet, FAO predicts that increased access to credit for these women would lessen the malnourished population by 100 million as agricultural output would go up by 4%. The visibility of women contributing in the GDP is less than what it ought to be. ILO shared that 865 million

women in the world could potentially contribute more to the GDP, out of which 812 million are from the third world alone. Moreover, IMF reports that 27% of the world's GDP growth per capita is lost because of gender parity. In the gender gap report of World Economic Forum in 2013, Bangladesh stood at the 75th place with a total score of .685 out of 1 in reducing the gender gap. In spite of the 20% female members of parliament, in spite of the encouraging increase in the primary enrolment of women, Bangladesh still has to handle many equality hiccups.

In Bangladesh, now a 16 year old is officially going to be ready for marriage. By lowering marriageable age from 18 to 16, Bangladesh will certainly be able to halve its child marriage stats by half by 2041, but will this truly change the quality of lives? Can just an official decree arrest the indecent exposure of a 16 year-old child? In all honesty, we may be regressing in more ways than one. In an interactive talk show in a private channel, a young bearded man posed a few questions to the panelists (of which your columnist was one). He asked: "Why does a woman need to serve a man up in the air when she has a husband to take care of? Isn't just hearing "ma" enough for a woman? Why would a woman ever require independence?" I shuddered in disgrace and burnt in shame. While not risking being politically too incorrect, I quietly asked him if he had ever visited a garment factory where women who have no husbands or even immediate family...have no option but to feed their own selves? To this, the young man remained silent.

Perhaps, silence is the best option for a society where we pretend to live in an equal world yet offer at best a 90/10 for women. Perhaps it's best to whisper in a world where women have access to only 2% of the world's total assets. Perhaps it's best not to have a voice at all!

The writer is Managing Director, Mohammadi Group.

LETTERS

TO THE EDITOR

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The red Toyota

With the passing of Ghulam Azam, those of us who lived in Dhaka in 1971 are reminded of the red Toyota sedan which frequently stopped outside the doors of friends and neighbours and collected a member of the household who was never seen again. The vehicle was one of those used by Ghulam Azam's Al-Badr and Al-Shams' Razakars to spirit away people who were thought to be the enemies of Pakistan.

That red Toyota returned to Dhaka recently. Ask not, Ghulam Azam, for whom the red Toyota came, it came for thee. And may the flames that engulf you now be as red as that Toyota, as you face eternal damnation.

Syed Hamde Ali
The Nawab Palace
Bogra

DRS, use of technology should go together

During the West Indies tour DRS was used. It was very difficult to see if the ball had nicked the bat



PHOTO: FIROZ AHMED

and without the use of hotspot or snickometer technology, the umpires' decision could not be reversed. Even in the BD-Zimbabwe series, it has been inconclusive whether the ball touched Riyad's bat or not. I feel that if the Decision Review System (DRS) is going to be used, then every technology must be available to the 3rd umpire in order to make the correct decision.

Amirul Rahim
New DOHS, Mohakhali
Dhaka

Extortion by railway men

The passenger trains heading towards Chittagong railway station are made to stop at Dewanhat overbridge area so that those travelling without tickets can get down. At that point, a section of railwaymen extorts money from the passengers travelling without tickets. It is not only the local trains that stop at Dewanhat area, the inter-city trains also do the same. The quality of service offered by the railway is getting worse day by day. We hope the authorities will look into the matter.

Zabed Wali
Chittagong

Comments on news report,
"Haunted forever," published on
October 25, 2014

Zia

Very tragic story indeed. Why aren't the human rights organisations playing any role here? I believe that Yasin's death was a planned murder and wasn't a road accident at all. Why don't the police investigate?

"The evil that men do...."
(Oct. 25, 2014)

Rahman Mostafiz

He cannot be forgotten and forgiven because of his nefarious role in 1971.

Dev Saha

Ironically, people who have been patronising the devil would be still in place and justify his cruel crimes and murders.

"Almost all secondary schools on track" (Oct. 24, 2014)

Nazmul Haq

According to the minister, increase of enrolment rate, decrease of dropout rate and attainment of gender parity are our tremendous achievements. But I am not sure whether it is a qualitative change.

"Barrages on the Ganges"
(Oct. 23, 2014)

Ahmed Aziz

If we still believe that India will keep any promise with Bangladesh, we are probably the most foolish nation in the world. Better figure out ways to restore the mountains and do dredging on rivers and construct a mass string of rain water reservoir around the country.

SM

India is killing our rivers and also responsible for desertification and destroying the ecology in the downstream.

Rezaul Karim

Bangladesh must immediately take this issue to the UN.