

Getting everyone in the picture: Don't forget girls

NIGEL CHAPMAN

IMAGINE you're a young girl in school and you've just received the results of a tough exam you sat recently. You've done really well and you can't wait to tell your parents. So you rush home and burst through the door, full of excitement. You hurry over to your mum and dad, but as soon as you find them, you know something is wrong. You can see it in their eyes. They have something to tell you so you sit down and listen. And then you find out what's going on: they've arranged for you to get married to a man twice your age because they just can't afford to look after you any more.

This is the story of Rubi from Bangladesh who saw her life turned upside down in an instant, pushed into marriage at just 15 years old. It was a horrifying situation, but rather than simply going along the path her parents had decided for her, Rubi did something courageous and remarkable: she fought back.

You see, Rubi knew the statistics. She knew that 64% of women in Bangladesh aged 20-24 got married before they were 18, which is illegal, although laws are often not followed. She also knew that getting married would mean the end of the schooling she so cherished. She'd have to drop out, leave her friends behind and focus on starting a family.

Rubi knew all of this because she had been part of a local child forum set up by an international NGO and a local partner organisation. There, she had learnt all about child marriage and her rights -- never imagining that she herself would be part of the story.

The ace up her sleeve

With support from the leaders of the child forum and the chairman of her local council, Rubi was able to call on the ace up her sleeve:

her birth certificate. Able to prove that she was just 15 years old, Rubi and her friends had the leeway they needed to convince her parents that this was not the right time to get married and that doing so would be illegal.

That simple piece of paper, giving Rubi the ability to prove who and how old she is, is a prime example of how birth registration can play a significant role in reducing child marriage.

Of course, birth registration alone isn't going to stop child marriage, but it is the first step towards a legal identity and recognition of a girl's relationship with the state. That recognition is what paves the way for girls and young women to access the education and freedom they need to be able to succeed in life and take control of their futures.

Having a legal identity means you can vote, get an education, sign contracts, get a job in the formal sector and protect against rights abuses like human trafficking and child marriage. Registration of births, as well as other key life events, is also vital for governments to be able to monitor and respond to issues like maternal mortality, unsafe abortion and teen pregnancy.

Basic tasks suddenly become more difficult without a form of legal identity. For girls and women, this only compounds an array of already existing issues that are pushing girls and women into the periphery.

Invisible children

Some 135 million children in Asia-Pacific have not had their births registered. While this number is split fairly evenly between male and female, we have to take into account that young girls and women already have to break down significant barriers just to be treated equally. If they are not registered, the barriers to participation become even more prominent.

Civil registration and vital statistics (CRVS) -- the registration and analysis of all major life events, like births, deaths and marriages -- is a cross-cutting issue that compounds challenges faced by girls and young women who are already marginalised and excluded from society.

Looking at CRVS through a gender lens is crucial. Empowered girls can change the world -- literally. Just one extra year of schooling means a girl will earn up to 25% more income. Yet if we don't treat CRVS as a tool for female empowerment, we do a disservice to all those girls and women who have dreams and aspirations.

The building blocks of governance

Well-functioning and trustworthy CRVS systems are the building blocks of inclusive and just societies that uphold rights, good governance and the rule of law. The weak state of CRVS systems has been described as a "scandal of invisibility" that is further excluding already marginalised groups.

The spotlight is now being placed on the invisible people of this world to give this issue the urgent attention it deserves. On November 24-28 in Bangkok, UNESCAP and partners will convene the first Ministerial Conference on CRVS in Asia and the Pacific. For the past nine months, the forum has been working with the United Nations and governments to develop a Regional Action Framework that will pave the way for a decade of CRVS and help us ensure that by 2024, every birth, death, marriage and other life event is registered.

It's time to get everyone in the picture, but we can't ignore the challenges already faced by girls like Rubi and the millions of others who have to make hard choices early on in life.

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EDUCATION UPSIDE DOWN



ASIA-PACIFIC RESPONSE TO HIV

Closing the gap

POONAM KHETRAPAL SINGH and SHIN YOUNG-SOO

THE vast majority of new HIV infections in the Asia-Pacific Region are occurring among populations most vulnerable to HIV: men who have sex with men, transgender people, people who inject drugs, sex workers, people in prisons and other closed settings.

Nearly five million people were living with HIV in the Asia-Pacific Region in 2013 -- about one sixth of the global burden. There were an estimated 350,000 new HIV infections in the Region in 2013 -- the second-highest regional HIV burden after Sub-Saharan Africa.

Partnerships between health systems and communities in the Region have improved access to life-saving treatment, increased domestic resources for HIV/AIDS programmes and reduced stigmatisation and discrimination. For example:

- Community organisations have helped formulate, implement and scale up the evidence-based recommendations contained in WHO's "Consolidated guidelines on HIV prevention, diagnosis, treatment and care for key populations;"

- In India, the Avahan HIV programme helped strengthen community-based organisations, leading to a sharp decline in the epidemic in several high-prevalence states. The lessons learnt are being incorporated in the national response, helping to ensure sustainability;

- In China, the government is increasingly engaging with civil society organisations. Nongovernmental organisations such as AIDS Care China are providing a key bridge between government HIV programmes and key populations;

- The governments of the Philippines and Thailand, two of many countries where the MSM HIV epidemic is surging alarmingly, are working actively with MSM organisations that connect communities with HIV services.

All of these examples fit the theme of World AIDS Day 2014: Closing the Gap. This theme is about empowering all people

to access the services they need.

Less than half of all HIV-positive people across the Asia-Pacific Region are aware of their status. An estimated 1.5 million people in the Region are receiving antiretroviral treatment -- about one third of the Region's HIV-positive population. This is a significant improvement compared with a few years ago, but the journey is less than half complete. WHO Member States can do better. It is only by closing testing and treatment gaps and reaching all in need that we can achieve our goal of ending AIDS in Asia by 2030.

We need to overcome challenges. Key populations continue to face stigmatisation and discrimination, including punitive legislation. This must change. WHO consolidated guidelines are guided by human rights principles and call for governments to enforce protective laws to eliminate discrimination and violence faced by key populations.

Evidence is adding to a dynamic response. Today, WHO has released a new update to recommend antiretrovirals as an emergency prevention intervention following possible HIV exposure for HIV-negative individuals, and to prevent and manage common opportunistic infections that affect many people living with HIV.

We need more resources and wiser investments to address the HIV crisis in key populations. A renewed focus on HIV response needs to be articulated in the post-2015 health and development agenda.

WHO works to improve the continuum of HIV prevention, treatment and care. We work hand in hand with key populations -- with a range of civil society organisations to help safeguard the health and well-being of millions of people.

Ultimately, health is a human right. Creating an enabling environment ensures equity and respect for human rights, ensuring greater access to essential health services for all people.

The writers are the WHO Regional Directors for the South-East Asia Region and Western Pacific Region, respectively. Access the WHO consolidated guidelines on HIV prevention, diagnosis, treatment and care for key populations at <http://www.who.int/hiv/pub/guidelines/keypopulations/en/>

Why gender and intersectionality?

SAAD ADNAN KHAN

IT is always interesting to observe and figure out the knowledge production process. How do ideas and lines of thought come into place? Who says it, to whom and where? What kind of effect does that have in public imagination?

Few months back, as I was going through the national curriculum English grammar book of class six, I was unsettled when I read a sentence that said "men are stronger than women," in the chapter on subject verb agreement. Next to it, in another column, two sentences on top of one another said: "Ms. Hamida is a nice woman" and "Kamal is an intelligent man." In the exercise on the next page, two more sentences caught my attention: "He has a lot of (money, moneys)" and "She has bought a pair of (shoe, shoes)."

It was quite funny and ridiculous to see men being portrayed as strong, intelligent and independent people who earn a lot of money, and women as weak, nice people who like to shop. I thought how does the blatant sexism present in these sentences shape the imagination of boys and girls who go to grade six?

What kind of wrong impression do they grow up with? And, how can the bluntness of language and production of such gender stereotypes among adolescents be countered?

Gender is like a permanent tattoo that we get when we are born. However, in the context of gender violence, we often miss out talking about gender itself. What does being a man or a woman mean? Many people do not fall in the gender identification of male or female, but belong to a third 'gender.' What does that tell us about how we perceive gender?

Discussions on gender usually revolve around women, often leaving out a thorough exploration of men and masculinity. More than ever, it is men who urgently need an understanding of gender and gender politics. We don't explore how masculinity is expressed in society. Boys are brought up to believe in hegemonic masculinity, which entails being superior to women, occupying more space and being the centre of things. Men are what women are not (or are not allowed to be). This is how oppression comes into being, when men subscribe to gender role that is exclusive, individualistic, dominating and less kind. Men are made to believe (by institutions such as

homes, schools, media and workplaces) that they are better and stronger, and that they must defend their superior status, often through coercion and violence, if needed.

Our understanding of gender and oppression becomes more interesting and complicated when we bring in intersectionality. Through the lens of intersectionality, we can understand how different power differentials or socio-cultural categories such as gender, class, sexuality, age/generation, disability, nationality, mother tongue, religion and so on, 'interact' and produce different kinds of unjust social relations. Violence against women is read as power inequity between man and woman. When we bring in intersectionality, we feel compelled to ask a few 'other' questions: who are the transgressors? Is it men? Do we refer more to men of a particular class as

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transgressors, compared to another class? Can men aggravate gender violence against other men? Can women oppress other women? What kind of oppression is it if a landlady beats her female domestic helper? What kind of oppression is it when sexual orientations and disability are not talked about? What kind of oppression is it if a (biologically born) man, who does not identify as a man, is stigmatised and excluded by the whole society (men and women)? How does neo-liberal capitalism and state violence deal with gender violence against factory workers and indigenous people? Is #HeForShe really an intersectional and contextual feminist movement?

Intersectionality gives oppression a face. Without discussions on intersectionality, our understanding of violence might remain

incomplete and one-dimensional, which will ultimately benefit no one. Intersectionality is important because it allows us to understand how different kinds of oppressions interact to further intensify gender oppression. We can learn to address other institutions of power and raise dangerous questions that could challenge norms (read oppression) and privileged positions. Exploring power and privileges also helps us understand how certain individuals arrive at certain points in life, while others cannot. We can then politically invest more sensibility and understanding on listening to people and bringing in different voices to create a more egalitarian space -- to challenge and change the way we look at others and also ourselves.

A Unicef report published a few months back says Bangladesh has the highest rate of girl abuse. Among the six recommendations, "bringing about changes in social norms" was mentioned last. Bringing about changes in social norms cannot be a linear course of action. It would mean a rigorous creation of new knowledge that could help us envision ourselves differently. Not so long ago, the government had thought of bringing down the legal age of marriage of both girls and boys in order to tackle sexual abuse of girls (has there been a more contradictory line of thought?). This strategy builds upon existing gender norms and expectations (girls should be married off to stay protected; men are the protectors of girls), and does not challenge 'masculine' and 'feminine' ideals in society. It is ad-hoc and lazy thinking and does not help us redefine and challenge different oppressions that emerge from the aforementioned power vectors.

Attempts to think about alternative knowledge models, to redefine gender and address oppression, are underway through the initiative of several activists, teachers, social scientists and psychologists in different organisations in Bangladesh. The concern should be about making the approaches of addressing and working around knowledge production and oppression, more intersectional. We need to constantly keep questioning to find out what other voices are being unheard in the process, and thus how we can keep revising and transforming, and take it from there.

The writer is a researcher at Institute of Educational Development, BRAC University.

CROSSWORD

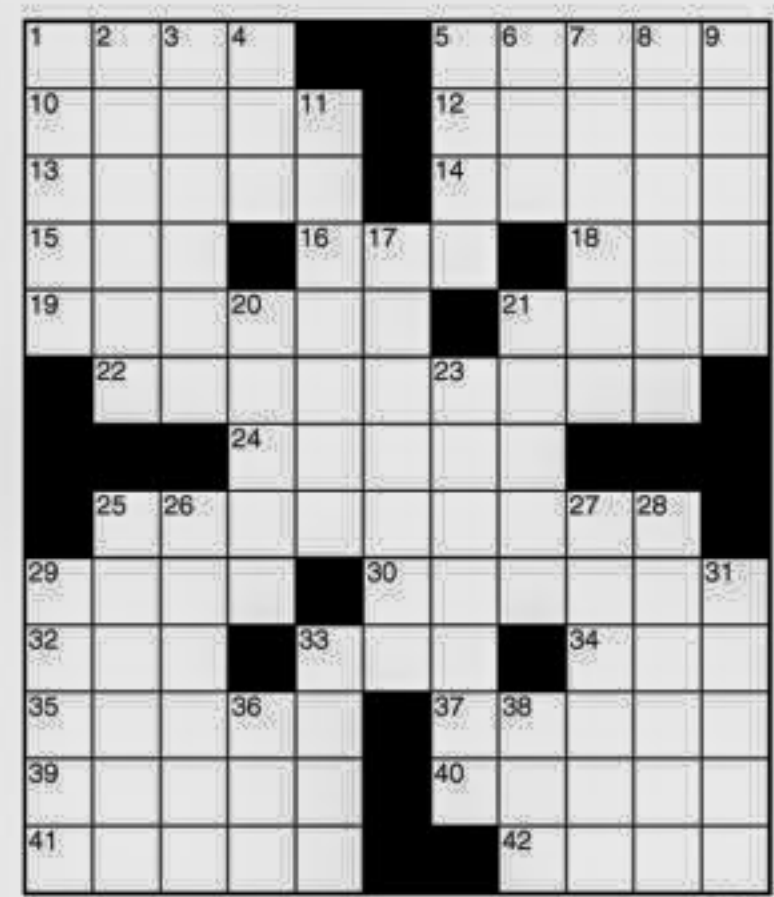
BY THOMAS JOSEPH

ACROSS

- Edison's middle name
- Prepares leftovers
- Pillages
- Alaska native
- Like bar beer
- Singer Reese
- Phone bill item
- Sturgeon eggs
- Under the weather
- Of the clan
- Disrobe
- Road blocker
- Football's Merlin
- Start of a gridiron possession
- Small dogs, for short
- Old Testament book
- Hold up
- Skill
- Ram's mate
- Exemplary
- "Skyfall" singer
- Heat setting
- Tore down
- Small, to Simone
- Ottoman rulers
- Up in the air
- Solitary sorts
- Elect
- One -- time
- Walk through water
- Pub product
- Charitable aid

DOWN

- Much-mocked hairstyle
- Stable section
- Stretches out
- Senior citizen
- Churlish ones
- Wine grape
- Soviet symbol
- Restaurant fan
- Pooped person's utterance
- Breathe with effort
- Anthony who wrote "The Candy Man"
- Use a mirror
- Oboe parts
- Settled
- French pal
- Wee dollop



CRYPTOQUOTE

DZ RLPVMX FZBUQXMW, BQX FZBU RXLV; DZ RLPVMX ZDRXUQ, BQX FZBU RXLUD. -- XMXLPZU UZZQXOXMD

Yesterday's Cryptoquote: SELL A MAN A FISH, HE EATS FOR A DAY, TEACH A MAN HOW TO FISH, YOU RUIN A WONDERFUL BUSINESS OPPORTUNITY. -- KARL MARX

YESTERDAY'S ANSWER

RAFTS HEIST
ALLAN ARMEY
SPORE SOPUP
CAW ERASURE
ACE RAT LAD
LARD FIRST
SUB TIE
PEELS OBOE
PAL ASH URL
ATLANTA YEA
SHEIK SPELT
HORDE TERSE
ASSET EASES

A XYDLBAAXR is LONGFELLOW

One letter stands for another. In this sample, A is used for the three L's, X for the two O's, etc. Single letters, apostrophes, the length and formation of the words are all hints. Each day the code letters are different.

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