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How we see the 'Future of Our Nation'

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On September 28 this year, our President and Prime Minister gave the customary messages of hope and encouragement to the children of the nation – oh and to the world too, to commemorate "World Child Rights Day" and Child Rights Week-2014". The President reiterated the clichéd 'children are the future of the world' mantra and added that if they were nurtured properly the world and civilisation would prosper. The Prime Minister reminded people that her father Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman had passed the Bangladesh Child Right Law in 1974. She said that her government had taken extensive programmes to improve the lot of the children.

Perhaps it was such a programme that led to some overenthusiastic individuals claiming to be officials of the Social Welfare Directorate to come to Karwan Bazar last Saturday evening. Perhaps they acted on their own accord. According to a Prothom Alo report, these people with the help of a few policemen, were catching hold of children and roughly hauling them into a microbus. The children were crying with terror. The 'official' who seemed to be the main hero of this Dickensian scene, claimed that this was part of the Directorate's rehabilitation programme for street

children who he said, were orphans. They would be taken to a shelter in Mirpur where they would get food, warm clothes and accommodation. But the children did not want to go. They protested, saying they had parents or guardians. It was only after a mob of local people surrounded the microbus and threatened those individuals that the children were set free. The Prothom Alo report adds that later when the director of administration of the Social Welfare Directorate was contacted he admitted that there was such a programme for street children but it was carried out without any coercion. If the children had parents they were counseled and then rehabilitated. The director said he didn't know anything about the Karwan Bazar incident.

Obviously the individuals, who were snatching the children and shoving them into the microbus like stray dogs condemned to the pound, were not your regular gang of kidnappers. They had official authority, coming in with armed policemen although they could not produce an official document that confirmed the orders for the move.

The incident is indicative of how this country treats 'the future of the world' – with total disregard for their dignity and safety. Those children of Karwan Bazar were working children, trying to supplement the family income by picking vegetables that fall off trucks, or carrying loads for shoppers or water for the vendors, anything to make a few bucks. Of course it is shameful that these children have to work long, inhuman hours, exposed to the elements and criminals of the street, instead of going to school and being cared for. But is this how we propose to 'nurture' them and give them better lives? By rough handling them, taking them away from whatever family they have and forcing some programme down their throats? The officials who carried out this heartless operation were clearly uneducated about what the rights of the child mean.

Grownups, in fact, often do not think twice before becoming verbally or physically abusive with children – in the streets, in schools, at home, with their own children but more with those who aren't their own and who are forced to work because of poverty (which already violates child labour laws). But humiliating and hitting children violates their right to be treated with dignity as human beings.

By the time this issue goes to print we will have celebrated our Victory Day with much grandeur – there will be parades and air shows and paratroopers decorating the sky. There will be songs and bright reds and greens everywhere. It will again be that strange mixture of joy and sorrow that every December greets us. Our joy for the privilege of being a citizen of an independent nation, our sorrow for those who gave up everything to attain that privilege for us. Freedom, democracy, independence – these are powerful concepts. Yet they will mean nothing if we cannot protect our children – all of them – and treat them with respect and love. That is how our valiant freedom fighters dreamed the future would be.