



TARAMON BIBI

The girl who became a soldier

Regional energy cooperation welcome

A big step in right direction

BANGLADESH'S energy woes may soon be over as short and long-term regional energy exchange among four countries appears to be taking off finally. With a master plan envisaging import of about 3,500 megawatts (MW) of electricity from Saarc countries, this is indeed great news for energy-starved Bangladesh. Regional energy cooperation is going to be a crucial part of Bangladesh's vision to generate or import electricity to the tune of 39,000 MW by 2030. Currently, the country is importing, or negotiating to import, approximately 600 MW from neighbouring India. This is planned to go up to 2,000 MW in 2018. With India setting up several hydro-electricity power plants in its North-East region, Bangladesh territory will have to be used to channel produced electricity to other regions.

Modalities on who will pay for what and other finer details involving capital expenditure on the establishment of infrastructure are still in the works. Once interconnectors and transmission lines are installed, Bangladesh will be in a position to import electricity, not just from India but from Bhutan and Nepal. For all these to become reality, the four countries will have to speed up the Saarc Framework Agreement for Energy Cooperation (Electricity) and Bimstec Trans-Power Exchange and Development project. Similarly the setting up of a common grid will pave the way for member countries to sell surplus power to each other. We would like to congratulate the government on its efforts in getting regional energy cooperation off the ground. There is much work to be done before trading of energy across nations becomes a reality.

Lowering legal age of marriage

Better initiatives needed to discourage child marriage

A new draft law proposed by the Ministry of Women and Children's Affairs recommends that while the minimum age for marriage should remain 18 for girls, parents can get them married off at 16 if there is "any logical reason" behind their decision.

A draft proposing that the minimum age of consent and marriage be lowered to 16 had already been shelved by the government last year. However, citing reasons such as pregnancy in minor girls, the ministry now says that this proposed amendment to the law should be considered.

Such a proposal is contradictory as, on the one hand, the government claims that any girl below the age of 18 is still a child while also arguing that parents have the right to get their daughter married off if the girl is 16 years or above.

If parents are given the choice to marry their daughters off at 16, we are surely to see a further drop in college and university enrolments of girls from the existing 47 percent and 33 percent respectively.

Insecurity and poverty are two major reasons for early marriage. Instead of further lowering the age of marriage, the government should ensure the security of girls in their homes and in society at large. There is also a need to educate people about the ills of early marriage. Reducing the legal marriageable age by two years would be an ill-advised move.

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

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Prompt conversations on violence against women

We live in a society where conversations about violence against women, rape in particular, are stigmatised. We live in a society where the burden of proof in instances of rape lies with the victim and not the perpetrator. Ain o Salish Kendra reports say a total of 401 rape cases were filed last year, out of which 68 resulted in death; many more instances of rape go unreported. The increasing number of women activists raising awareness gives us hope. But we need more Bangladeshi men to recognise that by staying silent on such issues they are in fact a part of the problem. They need to understand that violence against women is not just a women's issue, it is a men's issue too. We must rid ourselves of this dangerous mentality that sees such real issues as controversial and too embarrassing to speak about; only then can we address deep-rooted issues such as victim blaming and various other forms of violence faced by women.

Tawhid
On e-mail

Oppression against women

Oppression against women is widespread and is constantly mutating into new forms, be it acid attacks, bride burnings, rape or domestic violence. In developing and underdeveloped countries, women aged 15 to 45 are more likely to be maimed or die from male violence than from diseases. Surveys suggest that about one-third of all women globally face beatings in the home.

Many governments across the globe continue to turn a blind eye to this violence. Without legal retribution, assailants rarely face consequences for their actions and the victims are less likely to report the abuse.

While laws are important to help combat this violence, the main solution is to change the way people think. Since these attitudes are embedded in culture, they will only change with education and local leadership. Can we hope that on this International Women's Day, governments across the globe will take a solemn vow to fight against this curse?

Nuzhat
On e-mail

I don't know the English date. It was the month of Chaitra. I used to hear the sound of gunshots all around. With seven siblings, ours was a needy family. Father had died a long time ago. How old was I? 13 or 14. I used to work in other households. If I got work, I'd eat; if not, I'd have to go hungry. But there was no work in the village. Everyone was fleeing in fear of the military. It was Monday, I think, and I went out looking for work. I didn't find anything. So out of desperation, I tried to gather some kochu mukhi (edible roots) from the jungle, when two men appeared in front of me. I knew one of them. His name was Aziz Master. Aziz Master introduced me to the other man whom I didn't know. He was a freedom fighter of the East Bengal Regiment, named Habildar Muhib. He was looking for a cook for his camp. When I didn't agree to his offer, he took me to my mother. Mother didn't consent initially when she heard about the prospect of my working in a camp. After a lot of discussion, when Muhib saheb insisted that he would adopt me as a god-daughter, my mother agreed despite her unwillingness. The next day I went to the Doshghoriya freedom fighter's camp, where I started cooking.

Initially, in between my cooking chores, I would be sent to receive the positioning of the enemy. I would pretend to be a mad woman and collect information about the enemy from different sources and places and inform the camp about them. The freedom fighters would execute their operations based on the information I gave them. Meanwhile, my godfather Muhib Habildar said to me one day: "Taramon, I want you to do more work for us. You have the ability and so I want to teach you how to use firearms. You will be directly participating in the war." He taught me how to fire an SMG. In order to practice target shooting, he ordered me to fire at a turtle dove on the top branch of a tree. I succeeded on the first day itself.

Life of a freedom fighter: I didn't even realise when the 14-year-old teenage Taramon became a soldier while working with the soldiers of the East Bengal Regiment. The realisation hit me when the Pakistani army attacked us from a gunboat.

It was an afternoon during the month of Shrabon, the rain was pouring down on us. All of us at the camp were having our lunch. Suddenly, freedom fighter Aziz

Master called me and asked me to climb a beetle nut tree to check whether the Pakistani army was situated anywhere nearby. I climbed the tree and checked in the direction of the river through binoculars. While checking here and there, I suddenly chanced to see a launch. Gradually, after seeing more clearly, I understood that it was a gunboat of the enemy. The Pakistani army was heading towards our camp in that gunboat. Disaster! I cried out, "Be careful! The Pakistanis are coming..." Everyone left their meals, got hold of their guns and arms and took position. I quickly got down from the tree and took my position near them with my Chinese SMG in hand. Thus began an incredible fight. We fired shots. Their shots hit the trees near us. The small branches and leaves of the trees were falling on me. A bullet fired by me hit a Pakistani soldier. I loaded the magazine even more enthusias-



tically, and fired at them continuously. Like a piece of cloth being ripped, the bullets also ripped out of the gun ceaselessly. At times I heard the sounds of heavy machine guns that would make hearts tremble. After fighting like this until dusk, the Pakistani army retreated. The grounds of the camp reverberated with the cries of victory and 'Joy Bangla.'

I discovered myself that day; I saw myself transform from a maid to a soldier. After that we decided that it would not be safe to set the camp in that place any longer. We moved from Doshghoria to Ketontari. The air strikes of the Pakistani army began once we reached that place. A whole village was burnt to ashes. Several people died. We were ordered to dig bunkers. In one night, we dug 15 x 12 feet. Every time we heard the sound of a fighter plane,

we sought refuge in the bunkers. We would shoot at the planes whenever we got the opportunity. Thus began my different life.

I started weaving dreams then. The country will be rid of its enemies, it will be free. My siblings, my parents -- my entire family -- will now have enough food to eat.

One afternoon, we saw a fighter plane, which was unlike the others. No bombs were dropped from it. We wanted to shoot at it when it completed its circle of inspection and turned to go back. However, we were stopped by Aziz Master. We learnt from the camp that they had received news that the country was now independent. The Pakistani army had surrendered their arms. There were tears of joy in my eyes. The camp was filled with the continuous slogans of 'Joy Bangla.' I also lent my

life, the lecturer of Mymensingh Anondo Mohon College, Bilam Kanti De, came to visit me one day. While answering his questions, I learnt that I was a freedom fighter honoured with the title of Bir Protik. After that a report on finding me was published in Bhorer Kagoj. I was taken to Dhaka and felicitated. Bhorer Kagoj formed a fund to support me financially. They bought a land for me to build my house and some land for cultivation. Bangladesh Agricultural Research Institute established an organisation called RDRS on that land. After that, different organisations honoured and felicitated me. The government presented me with a land on the outskirts of Kurigram at Araji Polashbari. The then Commanding Officer of Kurigram BDR, Lieutenant

It's true that I am now no longer suffering from poverty but I have yet to see the country that I had envisioned. Even now freedom fighters live in poverty. Many die without receiving any treatment.

voice to these slogans.

A different life: With many dreams, the country became independent. A different life began. I returned to Rajibpur. I got to meet my mother and siblings again. We were once again consumed by poverty. I took work in someone's house. My older sister wasn't getting any marriage offers. The reason was that I worked at the camp. Everyone said that I was not a decent girl. One day, Abdul Majid of the same village proposed marriage to me. I became a victim of poverty and river erosion again and again. Life refused to move on. In the meantime, my body became the abode of tuberculosis. I didn't even have the money to buy medicines.

Bad days come to an end: The year, 1995. In the midst of such a difficult

Colonel Sumon Borua, built a semi-concrete house for me there in 2007.

It's true that I am now no longer suffering from poverty but I have yet to see the country that I had envisioned. Even now freedom fighters live in poverty. Many die without receiving any treatment. I didn't want to see such a Bangladesh. I wanted an enemy-free, happy Bangladesh.

About Taramon Bibi: Taramon Bibi was born in Shankar Madhabpur village of Kodalkati Union of Kurigram in 1957. Her husband Abdul Majid is a farmer. Her father is the late Abdus Sobhan while her mother is Kulsum Bewa. For her brave contributions during the liberation war, Taramon Bibi was honoured with the title of Bir Protik.

Translated by Upashana Salam of The Daily Star. Source: Ekattorer Bijoyinee, edited by Mustafiz Shah and Tawhidur Rahman, Shuddhasar, February 2011.

Living in a rape culture

NAHELA NOWSHIN

IN Chicago, a 19-year-old university student has been held on bail on sexual assault charges for tying up, beating and raping a fellow college student. In Liberia, a 12-year-old girl was raped and killed. In Durban, South Africa, two Pakistani men have been accused of raping a domestic worker. In Turkey, a 20-year-old woman was murdered for attempting to resist rape. In Sweden, a 24-year-old man has been detained over an alleged gang rape. In the Democratic Republic of Congo, a 74-year-old Belgian man has been arrested for raping two girls. This is just a glimpse of the news in the past week and the list goes on...

Rape culture, a culture where sexual violence is the norm, is universal and most of its victims are women. Worldwide, one in three women have experienced physical or sexual violence in their lifetime and 50% of sexual assaults are committed against girls under the age of 16.

In the past few days, the news has been dominated by the documentary, India's Daughter, made by British filmmaker Leslee Udwin. The documentary was inspired by nationwide protests following the fatal gang rape and torture of a 23-year-old woman in New Delhi in 2012. India has banned the broadcast of the documentary in which one of the convicted rapists blames the victim for the crime and for resisting rape. Revoltingly enough, the unremorseful rapist even went as far as to say that women are more responsible than men for being raped.

BBC had originally planned to air the documentary on March 8, International Women's Day, but laudably ignored the ban and aired it Wednesday night. The point of contention in the ensuing controversy, as expressed by India's home minister, seems to be why the film crew was allowed access to a convicted felon on death row. NDTV reproduced letters as proof of Udwin obtaining permission from the home ministry to interview the convict. This course of action by the home minister and other like-minded government officials is simply reprehensible; the authorities, worried about India's 'image,' are attempting to sideline a much-needed national conversation about the deep-rooted, dangerously misogynistic attitudes prevalent in the Indian subcontinent.

Rape, a form of sexual violence, is

about power and control; it is an aggressive act intended to degrade, dehumanise, torment and terrorise the victim. The hostility shown by the perpetrator threatens the victim's sense of self, and invades the victim's sense of privacy, safety and well-being. Rape culture, one of many ways in which sexual violence manifests itself, is perpetuated in societies that trivialise ("boys will be boys!") and rationalise ("she was wearing indecent clothes!") sexual violence. The media also plays a huge role in normalising and glamorising sexual violence by objectifying women's bodies and eroticising the physical abuse of women.

Often times, men accused of rape shift the responsibility of their wrongdoings on account of them acting on their inherent 'natural urges' triggered by

just another form of victim blaming in a culture that stigmatises and marginalises victims of rape who, at first stripped of physical power by the rapist, are then unwillingly trapped in the realm of pity and powerlessness by society at large.

Today, there is no sector in Bangladesh where women don't contribute. However, despite such tremendous gains, much of women's economic contributions remain unevaluated and unvalued. Manusher Jonno Foundation (MJF) reports that annually over Tk. 188 billion worth of work goes unreported; 95% of this sum is generated by women. Such blatant non-recognition of their work helps uphold stereotypes of women being a burden to their families, and prolong their lower status in society resulting in further discrimination and gender-based violence. The latter cannot



Noah Seelam/AFP/Getty Images

exogenous conditions such as the victim's 'provocative' clothing, time of day, etc. Such widespread noxious attitudes that attempt to quantify a woman's worth, by reducing it to monetary value (dowry) or pieces of clothing (sign of 'good' or 'bad' character), are telling signs of how women are often viewed as sub-human. While perpetrators of sexual violence are entitled to their 'natural' desires, victims are constantly questioned about the veracity of their claims. In Bangladesh, the colonial era Evidence Act, 1872 still allows use of character evidence about complainants in rape trials; women who claim to have been raped have the burden of proof while men accused of such crimes are considered innocent until proven guilty. This is

separated from the broader context of class oppression as poorer and less educated women are more prone to experience physical and sexual violence.

2.6 billion women live in 144 countries where rape in marriage is not a crime. The International Women's Development Agency (IWD) is petitioning to take the matter to the UN in order to pressurise the government of these countries to draft laws that will criminalise marital rape to ensure women's safety in their own homes. The lack of such legal provisions is incomprehensible; if anything, it only goes to demonstrate the patriarchal attitudes that commodify and view women's bodies as property to be owned even in the institution of marriage.

Rape culture is also endorsed in everyday life when we normalise sexually explicit jokes that demean women, tolerate sexual harassment, participate in victim blaming, define 'manhood' as being dominant and 'womanhood' as being submissive, and teach women to avoid being raped instead of teaching men not to rape.

Rape myths also affect the ways in which a society deals with rape crimes. Prevailing myths are destructive because they tend to rationalise and justify such acts, making it tougher for rape victims to seek help and recover. Some of these pernicious myths are: women falsely report rape, rape is perpetrated by strangers, a man cannot rape his wife, and only certain 'types' of women are raped. Such misconceptions are detrimental and sickening.

The onus lies within each and every one of us to reverse such reprehensible sexist attitudes through which women are persistently put under a dehumanising patriarchal microscope that constantly scrutinises every aspect of women's lives.

Both men and women must recognise that the universal problem that is rape culture is not just a women's issue but also a men's issue, and that there is no 'single answer' to end rape culture. On an individual level, however, we can begin by unlearning stereotypes that perpetuate the objectification of and enable violence towards women's bodies. The onus lies within each and every one of us to reverse such reprehensible sexist attitudes through which women are persistently put under a dehumanising patriarchal microscope that constantly scrutinises every aspect of women's lives.

The writer is a graduate of University of California, Los Angeles.