

Sustaining women's literacy and SDGs

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THE past week, on September 8, the world celebrated the International Literacy Day. This year's theme "Literacy and sustainable societies" was particularly significant considering the recently declared Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) targets. SDG 4 is to "ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote life-long learning opportunities for all" while target 4.6 is "by 2030 ensure that all youth and at least x percent of adults, both men and women, achieve literacy and numeracy." This year's International Literacy Day was also of particular significance given the latest UNESCO Global Monitoring Report (GMR) "Education for All 2000-2015".

Bangladesh has made significant progress in terms of adult literacy over the past 25 years. The MDG targets have helped prioritise literacy among women, a socially neglected segment of the population, by directing public funds to expand schooling opportunities for girls.

If published government records are any indication, the investment has paid off. According to UNESCO, female youth literacy jumped from 60 percent to 79 percent between 2000 and 2010 in Bangladesh. Given that girls outnumber boys in primary and secondary schooling, a further jump in female official literacy rate is expected. After all, formal schooling is the most critical institution for obtaining literacy skills in rural Bangladesh where many children belong to first-generation learners and illiterate parents.

However, evidence from the field and the recently published GMR warn that administrative data on literacy level in developing countries can be misleading.

This year's GMR has exposed the extent of illiteracy among adults around the world. Globally more than 750 million adults are unable to read and write, one that is faced by over half of all women in sub-Saharan Africa and South and West Asia; the poorest young women are six times less likely to be able to read than the richest.

Similar evidence was presented for Bangladesh during a public seminar on "Learning Crisis in South Asia" at BRAC on August 24, 2015 where we discussed the evidence on vulnerability to illiteracy based on the 2014 WiLCAS

(Women's Life Choices and Attitudes Survey) data. As part of the survey, we interviewed over 6000 women across 64 districts. In addition to asking women to self-report their literacy status (whether they can read and write), respondents were presented with a simple test of literacy alongside a rudimentary test of numeracy and cognitive ability. The results were striking. Consistent with government figures, 66 percent women reported themselves as literate. But only 48 percent of respondents could read two simple sentences in Bangla. Among women who reported themselves as literate, 35 to 60 percent failed in two simple grade 5 reading tests during the survey. Given that these so-called literate



PHOTO: STAR

women had on average completed junior secondary equivalent schooling. WiLCAS findings suggest poor retention ability among a segment of Bangladeshi women.

This loss of literacy is a particular risk for women in developing countries where the overall school quality is poor. The environment in which women can acquire and retain literacy skills is also shaped by various forms of social restrictions and norms. For instance, majority of Bangladeshi women opt out of work life and spend most of their lives as housewives. This creates conditions where literacy skills can be lost which in turn creates a new form of vulnerability.

Functional illiteracy can undermine voice and agency among adolescent girls and women, which exposes them

to various forms of violence such as early marriage.

Economic opportunities for women have been slowly increasing in Bangladesh with the expansion of the ready-made garment industry sector and microfinance schemes giving loans to rural women to set up microenterprises. But paid jobs for women graduating from secondary school still remains limited, making them vulnerable to situations where literacy cannot be retained. The poor quality of secondary schools makes it particularly hard to retain literacy in post-school years.

To make the matter worse, changing social environments have adversely

reinforce the conclusion of 2015 GMR -- increased access to learning opportunities is not enough if opportunities to use and retain literacy skills are low.

In the absence of functional literacy, millions of women in Bangladesh remain exposed to many forms of violence and insecurity. In addition, Bangladesh cannot sustain the process of social development that it has experienced over the past three decades without functionally literate mothers. Women's literacy is critical to attaining SDG 5: "Achieve gender equality and empower all women and girls".

As Bangladesh enters the post-2015 era of SDGs, we must ensure that our schools impart literacy skills that can be sustained in post-school years. Literacy campaigns must also be organised around the notion of 'lifelong learning' for all - children, youth and adults - irrespective of their level of schooling completed.

Efforts to create jobs for women must go hand in hand with government initiatives that ensure that rural schools provide minimum literacy skills that are sustained over time irrespective of what life choices women make over their lifetime. These can be completed by new initiatives targeting women who have graduated school but are economically inactive, constrained at home because of traditional social norms.

Many of them have easy access to ICT facilities which can be leveraged to create opportunities to promote literate environments and reading practices. However, there is also a wide gender gap in internet usage at the national level. According to BLS 2010, the corresponding figures were 2.00 percent for males and 0.97 percent for females.

In the absence of new initiatives and opportunities to sustain literacy in post-school years in Bangladesh, improved school enrolment and school completion by girls alone are unlikely to attain SDG target 4.6. Sustainable development is impossible in the post-2015 era without improved literacy and schooling will mean nothing without it.

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NOORUL QUADER MY HERO

S. M. EMDADUL ISLAM



IT was about a year and a half from the day the Kalurghat factory in Chittagong was set up; so, the year was probably 1981. When I asked the great man standing in front of me why he hired so many employees to run just one factory, he answered, "I have created a reservoir to rear talent. Don't ever think that there will always be only one such factory of this kind. There will be many more as time progresses. There will be related businesses too. Who do you think will run those factories? You people."

At the inexperienced age of 25, I thought that Noorul Quader Khan, founder of Desh Garments, had given this extempore answer to assure us, encourage us and to give us confidence. We all knew how witty he was. History proved, much later, that he was a visionary as well.

I was recruited, along with a host of others, to work in Desh Garments in 1979. The hiring process was an elaborate one, with the selected appointees being flown to South Korea for training. A task of mammoth scale, considering the time and expense it took to train so many inexperienced young men and women overseas.

We must recognise the fact that the training in Daewoo Corporation Pusan Factory, South Korea helped a very young Desh Garments Ltd to strike its roots and grow to its mature state. Senior Desh employees later spread out in Chittagong and Dhaka, paving the way for other export oriented garment manufacturers. Thus, a chain reaction was set off, enabling for the emergence of a myriad of allied industries and indirectly serving all the vital nerves of the country's economy. Major investments in sectors that are not related even indirectly with the RMG industry, are, in reality, the indirect outcomes of the successful entrepreneurs in the garment industry. Noorul Quader foresaw all this back in the early 80s.

I consider myself extremely fortunate to be a part of the Desh during its early days.

I am fortunate because I am a living witness of how this industry had begun about 35 years ago under the stewardship of a visionary - our beloved Noorul Quader Khan. I am fortunate because I did not have to learn about all this by reading history books or from others.

When we talk about the contribution of the readymade garment industry (RMG) in the country, we talk about the 20-plus billion dollar exports, growth of related industries and also unrelated ones like the cosmetic industry, tourism industry, hospitality industry, etc. We don't talk much about RMG's role in branding Bangladesh to the outside world. We hardly realise how this industry has transformed the lives of millions of rural young men and women over the last three decades. Young girls learnt that they did not have to marry early and could be independent. Imagine how all of this has helped to shape our society to the state that it is in now. Garment workers now have a sense of confidence. They can imagine a better future for themselves and their children.

And all of this has turned into a reality only because a man with a great mind envisioned something monumental a few decades ago and ventured a business culture that was unseen, unknown in the country prior to his initiatives. Noorul Quader, a towering, charismatic personality, was an excellent orator. Also an author, connoisseur of art and collector of rare paintings, Quader spoke in a baritone that captured everyone's attention. He could keep his audience spellbound by his deliberations, whether in Bangla or English. He was a valiant freedom fighter, who discarded his title 'Khan' in protest against the role of Pakistani rulers during the Liberation War of Bangladesh. He was a constant source of inspiration for me and, I am sure, for many others who knew him.

Noorul Quader was my role model, my hero. I think those who are conscious citizens of the country have a moral and social responsibility toward recognising his contributions to the society. May the memories of Noorul Quader remain an eternal source of encouragement for the entrepreneurs of today and tomorrow.

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POLICE FIRING ON EWU STUDENTS THE USE OF EXCESSIVE FORCE

MD. SAIMUM REZA TALUKDER

WE all know the idiom -- to shoot out of cannon into sparrows. It is a moral principle that discourages us from taking unnecessary, widespread, indiscriminate means and measures against someone. In the legal field, a similar concept is known as the Doctrine of Proportionality.

During the protest against the 7.5 percent VAT on private universities, the police fired rubber bullets at the students of East West University who held the protests. Students claimed that several faculty members and students were wounded in the process.

Although there is no hard and fast rule to determine the proportionality, the following questions are considered in international humanitarian law while determining an action during an armed conflict: Was the target a legitimate object? Was that legitimate object specific? Was that specific legitimate object a threat to law and order? Was the action necessary? Was it the last resort to deal with that specific legitimate object?

The same can be applied to determine whether the firing on East West University students on September 9 was at all called for. First, as they were protesting for their "right to education" in a non-violent way, they cannot be called a legitimate object. They were not demanding anything illegal. Secondly, police did not have a specific target. Not only students but two university teachers were also injured although they were not protesting along with the students. Third, were the students really a threat to law and order? The news on papers, TV channels and online media show that their protest were organised and peaceful, that no vehicles or property was vandalised in Dhaka, Chittagong or Sylhet! Nor did the students call for any

violent move so far. Fourth, was it really necessary to fire on the students? The Deputy Registrar of EWU complained to *The Daily Star* that police fired on the students without any provocation while they were returning to EWU after the blockade of the road! Was the firing necessary? Lastly, was firing the last resort for the police to disburse the students? The answer is a categorical 'No'. Instead of being more patient, tactical and responsible, police fired at students putting their lives in danger.

Moreover, according to Rule 153 (a) of Police Regulations Bengal (PRB), police is permitted to use firearms for the following three purposes only: (i) if police sees that a person's life or property is in danger and the right of private defence is necessary to be exercised; (ii) For the dispersal of unlawful assemblies as per the manner of Sections 127-128 of Code of Criminal Procedure (CrPC); and (iii) if a person creates obstacles to be arrested, then police can fire per the Section 46 of the CrPC. It is also stated in Section 46 (3) of CrPC that police cannot cause death while arresting. Rule 153 (c) of PRB says that the use of firearms is strictly a last resort. Now, can we say that there was no last resort but to fire on EWU students? In one sense, their public assembly was illegal, but their purpose was justified and legitimate. We all have that constitutional right to protest an affront on the right to education. That is why from an ethical and moral perspective, can we term the gathering of EWU students as "unlawful assembly"? Also, as per Rule 152 (ii) of PRB, police cannot come too close to the protesters to shoot with firearms. The pictures and videos that were shared on social media clearly show that police fired from close range. Police also fired indiscriminately violating the Rule 154 (b) of PRB, which left several faculty members and

students of EWU injured.

Another serious issue has arisen out of this situation. The motto of police is to protect civilians from injury. But alarmingly, we have seen that the number of fatal injuries by police has increased rapidly in the last couple of years. According to Ain O Salish Kendra, 128 people died in "crossfire" and "gunfight" between law enforcers and alleged "criminals" in 2014, while the number was 72 in 2013. What provoked the police personnel to fire upon the unarmed student protesters? It needs to be investigated. Could they not have used baton, water spray or any other non-lethal weapon? Could they not have arrested the students instead of firing on them? Or just stand and wait? It was not a riot situation which was out of control, nor did any of the students vandalise property. Then what provoked or compelled the police to use rubber bullets? Such questions seriously challenge the proportionality of force used on the EWU students.

Bangladesh needs to ratify the "Basic Principles on the Use of Force and Firearms by Law Enforcement Officials" which was adopted by the Eighth United Nations Congress on the Prevention of Crime and the Treatment of Offenders at Havana, Cuba in 1990. Had Bangladesh ratified it earlier, we could have brought a check and balance on policing in public assemblies through principles 12 to 14. Our civil and criminal laws should also be reformed according to these basic principles. Moreover, the police force needs to be given training in basic human rights education so that they respect the law before using firearms and using disproportionate force. We do not want to see children being shot while demanding their rights.

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A WORD A DAY



SONOROUS
 ['sɒnərəs]
 An imposingly deep and full sound

CROSSWORD BY THOMAS JOSEPH

- | | |
|------------------------|----------------------------|
| ACROSS | DOWN |
| 1 Fragment | 1 Annoy |
| 6 Relaxing resorts | 2 Asthma sufferer's device |
| 10 Embassy worker | 3 Difficult to pin down |
| 11 Used up | 4 Bottle plug |
| 12 Stock unit | 5 Storm center |
| 13 Be a sponge | 6 Reach across |
| 14 Cofer's assignment | 7 Bike part |
| 15 Last number | 8 Trig topic |
| 16 Actor Wallach | 9 Spirited horse |
| 17 Common verb | 11 Academic area |
| 18 Was in front | 15 Academic area |
| 19 Making merry | 15 work wk.'s end |
| 22 Stagger | 17 Urban prowler |
| 23 Roman censor | 20 Slippery one |
| 26 Razing | 21 Lass |
| 29 PC key | 24 Fairy queen |
| 32 Word of accord | 25 Barhopping |
| 33 Road sealer | 27 Horse healer |
| 34 Like a short play | 28 Salad makeup |
| 36 Kismet | 29 Namely |
| 37 Pebbles' mom | 30 Ouzo flavor |
| 38 Kayak's cousin | 31 Southern lass |
| 39 Spot in the ocean | 35 Prayer end |
| 40 Hunter in the stars | 36 Flight cost |
| 41 New driver, usually | 38 Corn core |
| 42 Pulses | |



YESTERDAY'S ANSWER

S P E A R A U N T S
 W A N D A S T E E L
 O U T O F T H E W A Y
 O L E T I E A N N
 P A R C E L S G E E
 C O R E P E C S
 W A R E S C O R K S
 I R O N W A G
 P U B G O T O B A T
 E G O I N C A L E
 O U T O F T H E B O X
 F L I N T E L E N A
 F A C E S R I L E S

BEETLE BAILEY by Mort Walker



BABY BLUES by Kirkman & Scott

