

| HUMAN RIGHTS |

Abdul Kader, a nine-year-old boy was cleaning the fuel chamber of a private car. Lying beneath the car's axle when Abdul opened the plug of the chamber, a sudden splash of octane poured on his face. He managed to seal the chamber with another plug quickly and saved the rest of the fuel. However, that did not save him from the harsh treatment of his manager. For the slightest mistake, the manager would often stop Abdul's meal and sometimes beat him mercilessly while 'showering' him with abusive words.

Abdul does not get any salary from his manager. He has been working as a novice motor mechanic for a year. For round the clock duty in the workshop, he gets only three square meals a day and a space in the workshop. His parents decided to stop his school when he was in class two and admitted him to the workshop in Dholaikhal to support his family.

In Dhaka's Dholaikhal and Banglamotor area, there are thousands of children like Abdul who have been forced to leave school to earn a livelihood by backbreaking jobs at the motor workshops. Besides these, children are employed in every industrial sector such as in the brickfield, welding workshops,



WE CAN'T TURN A BLIND EYE

MD SHAHNAWAZ KHAN CHANDAN

PHOTOS: PONIR HOSSAIN

garbage collection, construction works and so on for cheap labour. According to The National Child Labour Survey 2013 which was published in October 2015, 3.45 million children aged between 5 to 17 years have been working in Bangladesh and 1.8 million of them are involved in hazardous jobs.

However, a survey conducted by UNICEF in 2010 revealed that the number of working children aged between 5-17 years of age is 7.4 million in Bangladesh. According to a responsible official involved in the national survey who requested not to disclose his name, "I don't know about the survey conducted by UNICEF. However, our previous survey was conducted in 2003 which found the number of working children almost double the current number."

The source revealed a major discrepancy of the national survey that made it a questionable source concerning the number of working children in Bangladesh. The source said, "It was a household survey. Our survey scope was limited to working children living with their families at home. We did not include street children or the children who live in the workstations or outside their homes in the survey sample."

"Now, we are planning to launch



another survey on the street children and the working children who live outside their homes," he adds. This survey with such major inconsistency is still being considered as the basic source of information for any initiatives regarding the prevention and elimination of child labour in Bangladesh.

"For any kind of policy level or intervention programme regarding child

labour, we have to depend on this government survey. However, we are also not satisfied with the information and methodology of the recent survey" says Halima Akhter, program officer (advocacy and networking) of Bangladesh Shishu Adhikar Forum, one of Bangladesh's leading non government organisations working for children's rights. "We have contacted the national survey authority

but did not get any specific response," she adds.

A lot of initiatives by non government organisations are being operated in Bangladesh to include dropped out and working children into mainstream education and to rehabilitate those who are already involved in hazardous jobs. However, these are very difficult tasks. No reliable study in this regard means that the organisations who have been working to eliminate child labour in Bangladesh have to work without any specific data and operational information. As a result, many of such initiatives have been proved unsustainable and the numbers of children like Abdul are increasing day by day.

Bangladesh government has adopted a national policy to eliminate child labour in 2010. According to the policy, Bangladesh has envisioned to eliminate child labour from the country by 2025. Contrary to the vision, millions of children like Abdul are decaying their lives in lethal chemical industries, motor workshops or welding factories. And, the most unfortunate fact is, most of these children are not even recognised as working children by the national survey due to its weird methodology. To reach Bangladesh's great goal of eliminating child labour by 2025, there is no alternative to conduct another survey from where researchers and development workers can get a true, comprehensive picture of the child labour condition in Bangladesh. ■

| ENDEAVOUR |

Taking a gargantuan amount of responsibilities, keeping a respectable stature, being calm, kind and collected, but have strong leadership skills- all of that seemed like qualities of a superhuman. But then we witness the many women in leadership positions doing just that, and doing it wonderfully. Four girls, recently, got the opportunity to be shadow ambassadors for the embassies of Denmark, Brazil, Netherlands and the USA. The Shadow Ambassador initiative was designed to

the slums to observe the Shokhi project by BLAST, a project that aims to sensitise and create awareness amongst women, adolescents and men in the local community regarding sexual and reproductive health rights (SRHR), violence against women and girls (VAWG) and workers' rights. Talbia Tanvir completed her degree on Finance and Economics from North South University. She had seen the application for the competition on the Denmark Embassy's official Facebook page. "Two

The two younger shadow ambassadors were those of the Brazil Embassy and the US Embassy.

Mehzabin Khan Elma, an A Level's student of Academia says it was one of the best experiences she has had so far. "The one on one conversation with her (Brazil Ambassador, Da Nobrega), learning her perspective on women's rights, their involvement in society, what leadership is has inspired me enough for a lifetime," says the enthusiastic Elma. They went to a meeting with DCCI and discussed the

candidate from Siddiqui's, was a member of the American Center from beforehand. "After my O level's, I was a part of the Kennedy Luger Youth Exchange and Study Programme (YES) for a year. The YES programme was what got me involved with the American Center. They were the ones who selected me and suggested that I do this," Orpa smiles gratefully. With US Ambassador Marcia Bernicat, she visited Pan Pacific Sonargoan for US trade fair, "We met people from Johnson's, Chevron, and lot's big companies who I did a lot of networking with." They then went to the American Center to celebrate the one year anniversary of the Girl's Club, who work to strive for gender equality. "There, I met many empowered, inspiring women, and realised that there are many, many of us fighting for this great cause," says Orpa. "During my one on one talk with the ambassador, we discussed congress, her

LADIES-IN-REIGNING

NAZIBA BASHER

provide talented young Bangladeshi women to experience the daily activities of a diplomatic mission and to enhance gender equality.

Zaiba Tahyya shadowed with Dutch Ambassador Leoni Cuelenaere, Mehzabin Khan Elma shadowed with Brazil Ambassador Da Nobrega, Tasneem Kibra Orpa shadowed with the US Ambassador Marcia Bernicat, and Talbia Tanvir shadowed with Danish Ambassador Hanne Fugl Eskjær. These four enthusiastic young women each got to spend a day at the respective embassies and learn from such empowering women in leadership.

Foreign envoys to Bangladesh – who are all women – in December issued a joint statement calling for an end to gender-based violence in Bangladesh. This initiative was then first undertaken by the Danish embassy. Through an online competition, the candidates for each embassy were selected.

Zaiba Tahyya, with a degree in Criminology from the University of Essex, has been working for women empowerment ever since her return to Dhaka. "I saw the application on Facebook and applied to be the Danish shadow ambassador initially. They got back to me saying that someone was already selected for the Danish embassy, but they had liked my application very much and transferred it to the Embassy of Netherlands," says Zaiba, "To me, the best part of the whole experience was watching her do what she does. I even googled 'how to talk to an ambassador', I was so nervous! But the moment she saw me, she gave me a warm hug and made me feel a part of the experience from the get-go." she says, "She was so humble and joyful. But just when I was thinking that all this was very rosy and peachy, we walked into a meeting- and I was more in awe than before! People kept throwing information at her, and she was instantly analysing and giving solutions! I learned how analytical and quick a leader has to be - and she did all of that with a smile on her face!" While shadowing, Zaiba visited



The Shadow Ambassador's with their respective Ambassadors. From left to right: Tasneem Kibria Orpa with US Ambassador Marcia Bernicat, Talbia Tanvir with Danish Ambassador Hanne Fugl Eskjaer, Zaiba Tahyya with Dutch Ambassador Leone Cuelenaere, and Brazilian Ambassador Da Nobrega with Mehzabin Khan Elma.

weeks after applying, I was asked to come to the embassy where I was informed that I was chosen as the shadow ambassador," she says, "I got to meet most of the team members of each department of the embassy." She had gotten the opportunity to accompany madam ambassador to the Egyptian ambassador's residence. They later attended an art workshop held by the NGOs "MINA" and "SHAKO" for the Rana Plaza survivors. "Her ability to be benevolent and precise at the same time while making a point is very much worthy of genuine respect. I learnt that in order to be an effective leader one must never compromise with his/her ideals and morality, while at the same time being a team player and being considerate of others' relevant opinion goes a long way."

bilateral trade between Bangladesh and Brazil, and how it can be made better. Later on, they got to discussing current social problems and how they can be solved. "I learned, from her, to remain calm and collected at all times, no matter how dire the situation. I learned that to do something great is not about making major changes. It is about making small changes, and taking small ideas and executing them grandly. Leaders bring individuals together and achieve one unified goal," says Elma. "Even though we haven't achieved gender equality yet, I have access to the youth of today and leaders of tomorrow, and I believe this experience can help me raise awareness amongst them and encourage them." Tasneem Kibria Orpa, an A level's

experience over the years. But we also talked about her family, how my family works, the challenges we face as middle-class women. She demonstrates the possibilities for bringing change. That's what a leader does – shows everyone that it's possible to achieve what we dream of." These four thriving, spirited ladies have had an experience that can not only change their lives, but also help them change the lives of many others who are currently being oppressed with discrimination and violence. Because of such a great initiative, where they get to learn first hand from the best of leaders, and also considering the response from the participants, we can finally now dream of a Bangladesh where the ladies reign. And reign we will. ■