

Turning Rights into Realities

FARJANA SULTANA

Brishty, a 12-year old girl, is in class 5. At this early age her parents decide to get marry her off to a man three times older to her. We all have an idea how such stories end. In Bangladesh, child marriage is a problem.

The aforementioned story, however, had a different ending. Brishty's marriage was stopped by a youth group functioning in Mirpur Bauniabadh area. This is a part of Save the Children's Child Friendly Local Governance (CFLG) programme which aims for turning rights into realities in Bangladesh.

The members are young, dedicated individuals working for social change in their own community. From child marriage to health awareness programmes, education for poor students to vocational training courses – all are carried out by this group of young people with the help of local government body and development organisations.

This young group is conducting different activities like street dramas and training sessions to raise awareness on child marriage among other social issues. People from the local communities attend these sessions with eagerness. Through these initiatives they try to portray the adverse effects of child marriage and other social issues adjacent to this. Currently there are about 104 members working in five blocks of Bauniabadh. Due to their strong advocacy against child marriage the community has been declared a "child marriage free area" by the local ward commissioner.

"Parents need more counselling regarding child marriage. We have already conducted meetings and slowly but steadily it is contributing to change their mind-set," says Rokon, a second-year student at Bangabandhu



University College, also a youth volunteer.

From homes to government, societies to institutions, many tend to overlook the youngsters, leading to less attention paid towards their growth. Conversely, the case of Bauniabadh allows children and youth to be empowered. Now the local government, families and the community rely on them due to their persistent work towards positive changes.

"Activities like vocational training on tailoring and electronics are offered in the community. We also help students who could not continue their studies due to different obstacles. We counsel with teachers, arrange for

tuition waivers and also collectively provide money to them," explained Sharmin, a first-year Accounting student at Shahid Zia Mohila Degree College.

The story of this youth group is no magical tale from Hogwarts, but a very real one carried out with real life actions. They are the leaders who are sweeping away ill practices from their society and protecting their community from harmful consequences.

These young members intend to spread these changes throughout the entire Mirpur area and believe that the positive changes will ripple across the city if such work can be replicated with proper guidance and care.

Helping out one rickshaw puller at a time

MITHI CHOWDHURY

"Revolution" was an idea conceived by two university students – Muhtasim Samaun Sadaf and Fahim Hossain Dibosh – to bring some positive change into someone's life during the recent Eid ul-Fitr. Sadaf and Dibosh, along with a third volunteer, Rakin Ahmed, rented three rickshaws from a nearby garage so that the pullers of these rickshaws could go home and spend Eid with their families.

The organisers rented the rickshaws beforehand from the owner of a small garage in Banani, Alal Mohajon. "Alal Bhai was nice enough to not charge us any money. He was happy that we were helping out," said Sadaf. One of the pullers whose rickshaw was rented, Nurul Chacha, hadn't spent Eid with his family in almost five years. When he was approached by these youngsters willing to sacrifice the first day of Eid with their families so he could spend time with his, he became quite emotional. "While we are fortunate enough to spend Eid with our families, these under-appreciated men toil the entire day just to earn a few extra bucks. They are the pillars of our community and I wanted to give back, for a change," added Sadaf.

The three volunteers began cycling from the early hours of July 7. They rode around, primarily Banani and Gulshan areas, for almost six hours before calling it a day. "We couldn't continue any further because of muscle cramps. After this experience,

I have even more respect for the rickshaw-pullers of our country," said Dibosh. At the end of the day, the volunteers earned a total of BDT 2675, part of which they plan to invest in water purifiers for the rickshaws. "Pedal Pure is a cost-effective method to purify water. Contaminated water gets purified depending on how much you pedal," explained Dibosh. Pedal Pure filters approximately 600 ml of water every 1 km. If Sadaf and his friends are successful, this could ensure safe drinking water for all rickshaw pullers.

While the organisers are satisfied with the feat they've accomplished, they

acknowledge that none of it would have been possible without the support of an important faculty member of North South University. "Initially, our idea was faced with a lot of scepticism but my brother Fahim and my family advised me to go for it. Without the help of a faculty, Niza Talukder, our plans wouldn't have come to fruition," said Sadaf.

Many destinations were tricky to find and the scorching heat throughout the day was quite unbearable. The volunteers recalled that they received a lot of help from rickshaw pullers in surrounding localities.



"They gave us helpful directions when we couldn't recognise destinations requested by customers. They were also quite welcoming and they praised our initiative," said Rakin. In the future, they hope to establish an NGO of their own and change more lives with the work they do.

All said and done, it's commendable that these individuals took the time off their schedules to provide some hard working men a much-needed break. In doing so, they've proven themselves exemplary of the changes our generation can bring if we put our heart and mind to it.

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