

Are we running out of thought leaders?

Professor of English at Dhaka University and writer, Syed Manzoorul Islam talks to Eresh Omar Jamal on the core purpose of a university education

In an ideal world, what do you think is the purpose of a university?

I don't believe that we live in an ideal world. It's a theoretical and idealistic frame, handed down from a time when people dreamt about utopia. Although we have frequently heard of the term utopia since the time of Renaissance, it had never really materialised. What we are living in today is nothing short of a dystopia. Increasingly, our time is becoming very fractious and violent; and is far from the ideal world that you mentioned. But the university has the power to change this world substantially. A university is supposed to be a place where new learning is created and disseminated, ethical leadership is produced and the values of education are entrenched in the minds of the students. In situations where enabling forces come together, universities do perform according to the expectations of the people. If we look at Dhaka University, it has given leadership in all the political and cultural movements we have had in our country. A university is uniquely positioned to change the mindset of the students and imbibe in them the ideals of true citizenship, democracy, egalitarianism, humanism and a sense of belonging to the people and the land. And in varying ways, universities have always done that.

You have mentioned that there are students who are very conscious about what is going on around them. Are they being provided the necessary platforms to voice their concerns and opinions?

If you look at the history of social protests and political activism in our country, students have always created their own platforms — these had never been given to them. And the odds are often stacked against them. So they have to struggle to bring the people to share their platforms. As student activism of the right kind becomes less pronounced, the small number of activists needs the support of the wider student community. But the student community is increasingly becoming apolitical because they consider our politics to be violent and self-serving; so they keep their distance from this kind of politics. That is why conscious student bodies are having difficulty in setting up their platforms. But they are trying.

In your long career as a teacher, what is your assessment of the type of education we are giving to our students?

We are increasingly embracing an education which is market driven, dependant on rote learning, and is full of examinations. Creative thinking is not encouraged. We do not see any enlightened policies that will inspire educational institutions to come up with their



Syed Manzoorul Islam

best. The primary reason, of course, is that we do not have the required investment. With meagre budgetary allocations you cannot expect miracles to happen. We do have an educational policy, but it still remains confined within the government conversation level. We are moving away from educational ideals which, for example, you would find in Rabindranath Tagore's "Eastern University", or in Ralph Waldo Emerson's "The American Scholar". What these two thinkers promoted is a scholar's ability to transform information into knowledge and knowledge into wisdom. This is missing in our educational enterprise.

So would you say that our higher educational institutions have not been as successful in producing the thought leaders many would argue universities are meant to produce?

Yes, they have produced capable market leaders and efficient executives for the corporate sector, MNCs and the government. But "thought leaders", as you put it — not many. Thought leaders by definition are those who inspire others to think, rationalise and reach for the highest ideals; they do not chase limited objectives, but transcend them and think out of the box; they are innovative and creative, ethical and uncompromising in their principles and have a strong sense of culture. Culture is missing in our education. Public universities have no cultural activities any

more. Sports activities are also absent in most universities. Universities do not have proper laboratories — not to mention the state of the art laboratories needed in science education; they don't even have libraries, which, I believe are intellectual hubs of any university. What can the students learn then? So the students have no facilities and incentives to become thought leaders. All they want to do is to pass with good grades so they can get good jobs. Our politics doesn't encourage thought leaders; in fact fears them. Our society is not prepared to welcome thought leaders. It is happy with the status quo.

To produce both creative and critical thinkers, what intellectual environment do you think is needed?

First, the prevalent market driven ideology has to be neutralised. Instead, students should be taught that if they become good human beings, are sensitive about issues that affect our lives, have humanitarian virtues, they can become leaders on whom others can depend on in times of crisis. Higher education is just the tip of an iceberg — the base is the most important in preparing students for their lives. Unfortunately, our primary education lacks imagination and the joy of learning. If our students were taught from the beginning of their lives that their sole purpose is not to become an office worker or a salary man, but to become a scientist, an educator, an

innovator, a social leader, or as you put it so beautifully, a "thought leader", they would achieve wonders. But right now we have students who have not heard anyone telling them that their lives don't end in an office — government or corporate — but, the whole wide world is theirs. Everyone tells them to fit into the status quo. That cannot produce what you're asking for.

Over the years have you noticed any significant change in how students approach their studies?

One change I have noticed is an overwhelming desire to put public examinations such as the BCS examinations over and above their university examinations. If you go to Dhaka University library in the morning, you will see a huge queue of students waiting to get in as soon as the doors open. The first look would make you very happy. This was my experience one fine morning at 7am when I saw students making a beeline for the library. But later I realised that they were there to read for their BCS examinations. That is the sad part. Another change, of course, is that students are becoming very apolitical. They are happy to work within the status quo. The desire for excellence is somehow muted. A university however, is a very strange and interesting place. While many students are going in that direction, quite a few others are taking a different direction. I believe that if even one percent students strive to

become thought leaders, they can neutralise a much larger percentile looking to become office workers and salary men. So while a large number of students are looking to become government workers or corporate executives, others are preparing themselves to take up challenges of the future. Only the future can tell which force will be more important to us, but I hope that the latter will be more dominant in the years to come.

What is the difference in students' thinking now from when you were in university?

I was in the university in the pre-visual culture age. It was an age when books were important. The only screens we had access to were film and television. The university playground was always crowded. Politics was an addiction for many students because political platforms provided them an opportunity not simply to register their protests, but to exchange ideas. That is why Pakistan had no chance to resist us with its dysfunctional government. 1971 didn't happen only in 1971, it was a cumulative effort by generations of students who thought about their destinies, predicaments, problems and solutions. This kind of passionate thinking is missing today. The visual culture has created what a French philosopher, Guy Debord, said it would, back in 1968 — a society of the spectacle. With everything becoming spectacular, how can you instil values and education in which thinking through a problem is important? Where rationalising and philosophising is important? Now you have the Facebook culture, where the virtual has supplanted the real. But when we were students, we lived in a real world, where real pains and sufferings affected us. Not pains and sufferings carried through images on Facebook where you feel some kind of virtual sympathy and then forget about it. Because we felt real sympathy, we went the whole mile in helping people out in the streets. Now, and I don't blame them as they are products of their own time, people lack commitment.

What advice would you give to young people who are trying to make a difference?

I do not like to give advice. But I do like to share ideas. Firstly I would tell them to believe in themselves. If Einstein could think of such a theory, so can you. Secondly, think out of the box. Society has put you in a box which doesn't have any windows. To get out, you must think independently and refuse to get detached from the people who have given you meaning. It doesn't matter what you become, each area has avenues that lead to the larger world. You must be ready to walk mile after mile towards your destination. Society will tell you you're no good. But don't believe in what people say. Believe in what the small voice inside of you tells you.

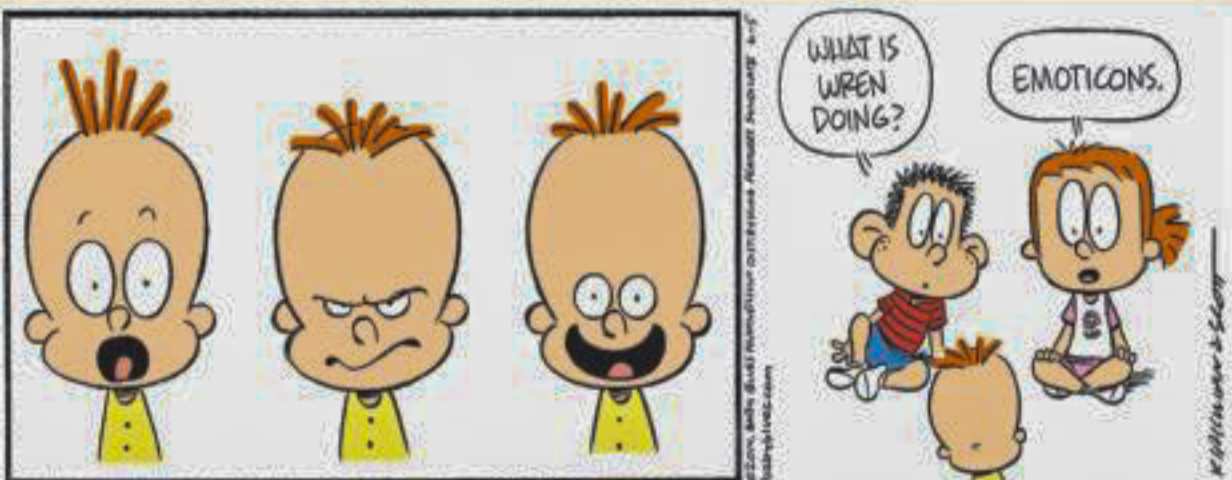
BEETLE BAILEY

by Mort Walker



BABY BLUES

by Kirkman & Scott



CROSSWORD BY THOMAS JOSEPH

- ACROSS**
- 1 Showed pleasure
 - 7 Racket
 - 11 Opportune
 - 12 Went fast
 - 13 Facilitate
 - 14 Prepares for battle
 - 15 Casino setting
 - 16 Wall climbers
 - 17 Perfect place
 - 18 Peaceful
 - 19 Frigg's husband
 - 21 Lend a hand
 - 22 Caracas's nation
 - 25 Receipt line
 - 26 Saloon quaff
 - 27 Makes law
 - 29 Tea type
 - 33 Yoda's creator
 - 34 Yarn
 - 35 Back muscles
 - 36 Mixologist
 - 37 Coup target
 - 38 Comfortable
 - 39 Trick
- DOWN**
- 1 Canyon of comics
 - 2 Searched for a vein
 - 3 Pol's concern
 - 4 Beirut's nation
 - 5 Wings
 - 6 Do fabric work
 - 7 Flight unit
 - 8 Of an eye part
 - 9 Yerevan's nation
 - 10 Disordered
 - 16 Site
 - 18 Shoe box numbers
 - 20 Owed amounts
 - 22 Vila's nation
 - 23 Track bets
 - 24 Asmara's nation
 - 25 Bank worker
 - 28 Social group
 - 30 Deep sleeps
 - 31 Wipe out
 - 32 Force units
 - 34 Fill
 - 36 Night flier

YESTERDAY'S ANSWER

D	A	M	U	P	R	O	M	P	S
E	R	A	S	E	A	W	A	R	E
L	A	K	E	R	I	N	K	E	R
A	G	E	I	R	S	K	E	R	
Y	O	S	D	U	E	S	A	N	
S	N	A	P	O	N	M	A	R	E
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	R	O	Y	O	R	E	R	E	T
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	H	E	R	D	S	L	U	R	E

Ending violence against girl children What we need to do

LAILA KHONDKAR

THE following news (published by a leading Bengali national daily on September 30, the National Day of the Girl Child) has been haunting me since I read it:

In the last one and a half years, 24 girls below three years were raped.

It was also reported that most of the perpetrators were known to the children. I keep on thinking about the long-term negative physical, mental and emotional consequences the children will face after experiencing such sexual violence. Once again, I am reminded of the importance of strengthening the child protection system of Bangladesh at the national and community level in order to prevent and respond to violence. According to Bangladesh Shishu Adhikar Forum, based on media reports, during January to August 2016, 291 girls were raped (39 gang rapes, and 13 girls were murdered after rape). Many cases are often unreported. So what we see is just the tip of the iceberg, and that should be enough to be alarmed. Due to lack of reliable baseline data, it is challenging to comment on whether violence against girls has actually increased or whether we know more about it due to increase in reporting. However, observations suggest that the society has become generally more unsafe for children, especially girls. Just think about the amount of time mothers spend to accompany their children to schools/coaching centres; many of them wait there until the classes end.

Recently while talking to a group of women in their early 40s (most of whom are parents of adolescent children), one commented, "When we went to school, our parents did not hesitate to let us go by ourselves in our chauffeur driven car, but now we cannot even do that for our boys; it's unthinkable to do so for girls." All of us can remember horrifying stories from recent months where girls were brutally killed or mutilated for not responding to love proposals of young men or for other reasons. Girls have also committed suicides after not being able to deal with the pressure of rape or sexual harassment. Lack of safety of girls is one of the reasons for which some parents decide to arrange their marriage, as they consider this will deter men from

harassing girls. In this context, how will our girl children realise their full human potential? Have we been able to create an environment where girls can dream freely about their future and the contribution they want to make to society without being constrained by the fears of violence?

Playgrounds for children are diminishing in Dhaka and other major cities. The ones that remain are mostly

and do not respect them as human beings, sexual violence will continue.

Recently, we have also witnessed reports of harassment over mobile phones and the internet. While technology creates new opportunities for education, entertainment and communication, it has also led to new forms of violence against women and children. We have to be pro-active in addressing this.

perpetrators were punished. This means that the rate of completing trials is 3.66 percent and only 0.45 percent perpetrators were brought to justice!

Our justice system is not women and child friendly. They are not treated with dignity and the process makes them suffer the trauma all over again. There are huge delays in resolving the cases. In addition, societal stigma manifested by character assassination of the concerned women, and the influence of powerful people (usually family members of the perpetrators), who want to divert the course of justice, are discouraging for anyone, and many families are not able to continue the process. There should be speedy trials for cases related to violence against women and children; media should also follow up on the cases until those are closed.

It is very important that we empower girls and develop their self-confidence so that they do not decide to end their lives after facing sexual violence, and can challenge patriarchal norms. It is critical to sensitise men and boys on how to treat women with respect. Evidence suggests that engaging men and boys contributes to reducing sexual and gender based violence, and some of them can work as change agents in their communities. The capacity of parents should be developed in raising children in a way that boys and girls become respectful to each other. There is a tendency by media to portray women and men in roles that conform to gender stereotypes (eg. women are depicted as being conscious only about their physical beauty, giving disproportionate emphasis on their roles as wife and mother/caregiver, dependent on someone, while male are shown as powerful, providers for women etc). The reality is completely different: many women are excelling in education and various professions, and contribute significantly to the economy, politics, culture and society. It is thus imperative to promote positive, strong role models for girls.

We should stop tolerating violence. Not being able to end this will be our collective failure. Let us take a strong position and do everything we can to protect girls and women from violence.

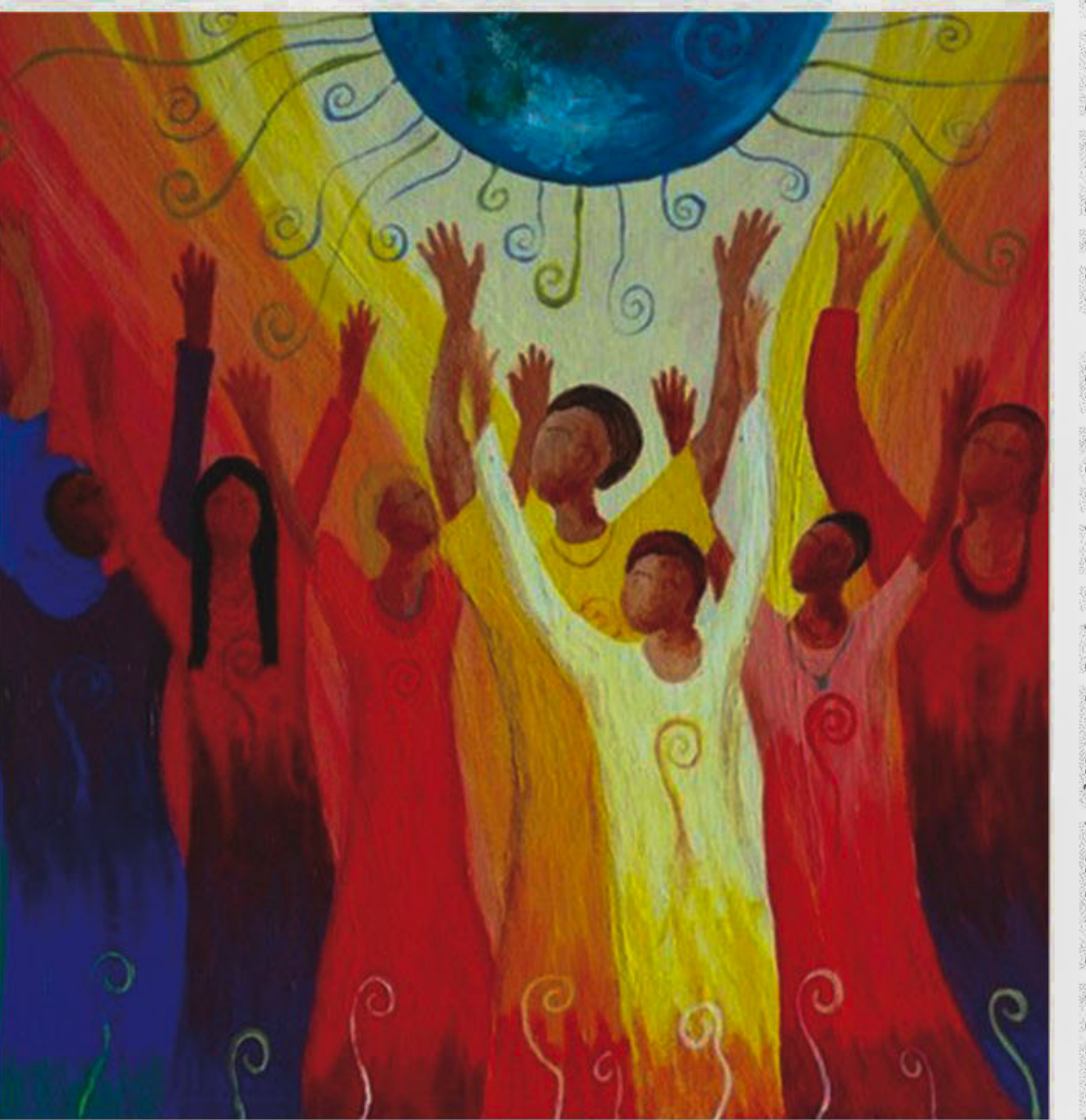


ILLUSTRATION: HEATHER PLETT

used by boys. Our girls hardly have any access to outdoor sports or public space. Despite the challenges, Bangladesh Under-16 Girls' Football Team (most of whose players hail from villages) continues to make us proud through their achievements. Sadly, last month, the footballers were harassed by some men while using public transport. Shouldn't we be ashamed of this? Until we stop treating girls and women as sexual objects

The culture of impunity regarding violence against women and children must end. The following numbers may be sufficient to make the point: 22,386 women and children have received treatment from the One Stop Crisis Centres (started in 2001) of ten government hospitals for rape and other forms of violence till 2015. Five thousand and three cases were filed; there have been 820 verdicts, and only 101