

ARE WE DOING ENOUGH FOR OUR CHILDREN?

SARAH ANJUM BARI

I used to harass girls on their way to school. Now I create awareness among my peers that girls must be treated with respect and dignity. When my parents want to arrange child marriage, I protest and explain that it isn't good for my sister."

This testimony of a young volunteer from a Save the Children's programme shines light on the complex child development scenario in our country: it tells us about the problems that exist, but also that strong reforms are underway.

Recent news updates have been rife with incidents of child abuse across the country. From January to August 2016, a total of 291 children have been raped, 183 have been murdered, 205 have been injured through punishments at educational institutes and 143 have fallen victims to diseases, according to the Child Rights Violation Data from Bangladesh Shishu Adhikar Forum. While the statistics stress on the persistence of abusive culture and health hazards children are vulnerable to in Bangladesh, the recent gruesome images of a nine-year-old domestic help's wounds have brought home the magnitude of the horrors. In an interview with *The Daily Star*, Save the Children's Country Director Mark T. Pierce addresses some of the major aspects of child development that require attention.

"Our real focus is to strengthen the government's child protection system from the national to the local to the community level," says Mark Pierce. "We focus on building the government's capacity and working with local communities to facilitate awareness, prevention, protection, and then if there is a case, intervention. Most importantly, we are working on strengthening kids' awareness and capacity so that they can take care of themselves."

Violence against children at home and schools is a deep-rooted malaise in Bangladesh – so much so that it isn't even labelled as abuse, but after a natural part of the disciplining regime. It's a horrifying tradition maintained through generations of children being beaten up, who grow up to inflict the same behaviour on their own children. "We train parents, caregivers, and teachers in communities to use positive, non-violent ways of punishing wrongdoings. We're working with the Ministry of primary mass education to help implement the banning of physical and humiliating punishment in schools," explains Pierce.

Meanwhile, at 64 percent, child marriage rates in Bangladesh are still among the highest in the world. The Child Marriage Restraint Act 1929 bans all boys younger than 21 and girls younger than 18 from getting married, and involves a month-long imprisonment or TK 1000 fine or both for adults responsible for or involved in enabling such illegal practices. Moreover, the ease with which fake birth certificates are issued weakens enforcement of the law.

Natural disasters are a catalyst. "River erosion in some places forces families to move from place to place," explains Pierce. "Scared of exposing their daughters to abuse at shelters or relatives' houses, parents feel



COURTESY: SAVE THE CHILDREN

vulnerable and marry the daughters off at a young age." Similar outcomes stem from parents' need to protect daughters from sexual harassment while travelling, who inexplicably think of marriage as a precaution against such incidents.

Pierce mentions an interesting mapping programme that could target these concerns in urban settings. "Suppose they're walking from school to home and there's a particular area where they feel unsafe," he elaborates. "Those areas could get more lights up, ask for more police presence or encourage walking in a group. It wouldn't cost very much. It's just a matter of identifying the vulnerable areas and then trying to address them along the route."

The government has been trying to digitise information to prevent people from creating fake marriage and birth certificates that help to circumvent the law against child marriage. "We are increasing awareness," remarks Pierce, "making sure laws are enacted, improving girls' livelihoods and ensuring that they stay in school. Child marriage is still prevalent because you have to get the right synergy between various parties and causes. Improvements in terms of birth and marriage certificates; vocational training; together, these things will bring down child marriage."

These statistics, moreover, are a lag indicator. They are not measured everyday – so the situation may already have improved but we might find empirical proof of it a year from now. "Bangladesh is very unique in that there are more girls than boys in primary and secondary schools. That is one of the indicators that suggest that child marriage rate will come down," predicts Pierce.

Other technical factors hamper child development – such as lack of nutrition and sanitation, and natural

disasters. "The stunting rate in Bangladesh is around 37 percent. A number of our programmes are trying to bring down malnutrition, stunting particularly," says Pierce.

But what about bureaucratic impediments that tend to spring up in most humanitarian initiatives? Pierce sheds light on how the Bangladeshi government has in fact been unique in its support. The only complication has been in coordinating the large number of stakeholders involved in the development work, which in turn requires resources. Congratulating Bangladesh in its progress in terms of the Millennium Development Goals, Pierce shares that, "One of the beauties of working here is that you're working with the government towards the same goals. That said, there is a lot of work to be done."

The Child Act 2013 proposes the provision of probation officers for each district, upazila and metropolitan area. These officers have to communicate with children coming in contact with the law, find out the reason for the crime, their background and other important information, and help them get bail if advisable. Child Welfare Boards for each district will monitor disadvantaged children to facilitate rehabilitation, or remove them from harmful environments. Police stations will be set up with Child Affairs Desks and maintain separate records of child-related cases. Implementation of the Act, however, has highlighted the areas that require improvement. For instance, the draft encompassed all cases involving child protection or development as part of the Child Court. This led to an overwhelming count of cases as custody matters in divorce settlements also fell under their jurisdiction.

"Initiatives are already underway to address the inconsistencies and challenges. Department of Social Services has talked to us and we are going to work in

partnership with legal professionals to help support the government in amendment of the act," says Pierce.

SC's platforms like the "National Children's Parliament", "Engaging men and boys to address sexual gender-based violence", and "National Children's Taskforce" in all 64 districts shine light on the importance of children's participation crucial to the movement. Besides the use of social media and other ICT platforms, Save the Children is currently testing an Online Citizen Reporting Portal, which will allow ordinary citizens to report child abuse cases, and get information on public education and various child rights issues. The key motive, explains the Country Director, is to listen to children and engage them in a meaningful way, so that they can be their own change agents.

"There is a societal tolerance about violence against children," points out Pierce. "We have witnessed recent cases where people heard children screaming but no one helped them. We need an attitudinal shift in the way we treat children in our homes, schools and communities, otherwise they will always have a lower status in society and they will continue to be violated. Public attitude needs reforms."

On the bright side, Pierce points out how 50 percent of the population here is under 24, who will potentially grow



Mark T. Pierce, Country Director, Save the Children

up to become change-makers in the next 10 years. He explains, "Not only will it have tremendous economic but also social benefits. From a much better educated workforce, people will be much more aware of their rights. They will want to participate in society and government."

Stressing on the Every Last Child Campaign, Pierce reiterates that, "Bangladesh has made remarkable strides in terms of development. Now it's time to make sure that every last child is included in the development process; that they have the same access to good health, that they're protected and educated just like you and me."

The writer is a student of English and Economics at NSU, and an intern at the Editorial department, *The Daily Star*.

Making RMG growth lasting

DR. ABDULLAH SHIBLI

BANGLADESH'S garments industry, for good or worse, has been on the radar screen of policy regulators, North American and European trade union movements, international lenders, as well as global activists promoting sustainable and equitable growth. Harvard University and Bangladeshi scholars and professionals in the USA have taken a keen interest in the sustainability of this industry for many years and watched its progress with hope and trepidation since the Rana Plaza disaster three years ago, and are actively involved in a search for a pathway that is economically feasible for the young and growing industry. At a recent conference at Harvard, it appears from the debates and discussions that the jury is still out on two important issues: a. Can Bangladesh afford to please all stakeholders and b. Should Bangladesh RMG first build a safe environment for its workers and then address the living wage issue, or work on these two fronts simultaneously?

The Harvard Conference held on the last weekend of September in Cambridge, MA, had a very ambitious theme: 'Sustainable Models for the Bangladesh Apparel Industry'. Conference participants



included government representatives from Bangladesh, USA, Canada, The Netherlands and the European Union as well as Bangladesh garment manufacturers and exporters. However, as was expected there were some heated exchanges between the RMG interest and government representatives on one side, and the motley group of labour leaders, scholars and "external" watchdogs who first raised the alarm on working conditions and labour practices in Bangladesh, on the other. The organiser of the conference, International Sustainable Development Institute (ISDI) and its dynamic Executive Director, Iqbal

Yousuf, deserves credit for bringing these disparate groups to the same table, and keeping the focus on the prospects and promises of our garments industry as it tries to meet the goal of USD 50 billion set by the government and the higher standards demanded by the rest of the world.

The key challenge that all parties agree on is, Bangladesh is walking a tightrope as the garments industry implements various safety practices and standards, and improves workers' living conditions. Speakers voiced their concern about the lack of progress on unionisation of garments workers. Notwithstanding the protestations by Dr. Mashur

Rahman, Economic Adviser to the Prime Minister, Showkat Aziz Russell of the Amber Group, and Barrister Tanjib-ul Alam, the advocates for the labour union cited many instances of labour harassment, government's lack of interest, and the uphill battle that the RMG labour unions faced to organise and register.

In his keynote speech, Dr. Mashur Rahman spoke out for the Bangladesh government's efforts to prod the RMG sector to address various concerns voiced following the Rana Plaza accident. He, using data and statistics, highlighted the many achievements made in the last three years, particularly in hiring

more inspectors and implementing the minimum wage laws. To quote, "Bangladesh exporters have done well—they have not only sustained export, they have shown improvement while others stayed constant or have had negative performance." Amy McGann, Labour Officer of the US Department of State, echoed the sentiments of Dr. Rahman, and acknowledged that progress has been made in strengthening workers' safety and safeguarding their rights. Nonetheless, when asked about the possible reinstatement of GSP privileges for the garments industry, there were no clear indications from the representative of US government. Evan Fox, a US diplomat at the American Embassy in Dhaka, expressed his optimism on the progress made in the various fronts.

The discussions were organised around the four topics of the conference: 1. Supply chain compliance and the need for fair price strategy and shared responsibility; 2. Trade policy, workers' rights and working condition – opportunities and challenges; 3. Environmental sustainable development strategy: A necessity, not an option; and 4. Bangladesh apparel industry – road map to achieve USD 50 billion by 2021. Angela Chan, Senior Vice

President of the DXL Group in the USA, who works with the garments industry of Bangladesh provided a case study of how her group was able to raise the efficiency of DXL's suppliers in Bangladesh by offering a long-term contract. Many others at the conference expressed the hope that the buyers, in addition to making demands on the suppliers, could offer some incentives, including price guarantees, long-term contracts, and loans to modernise.

Dr. Hasnath raised the issue that China and Vietnam had worse trade union practices than Bangladesh, and were nonetheless given a "free pass".

The RMG owners are caught between the rock and a hard place. While world price of apparels are declining, the buyers are asking for improvements in workers' safety and factory environment along with stronger trade unions. Isn't it time for the rest of the world to live up to its responsibilities, too?

In response to this, Yevgeniya Savchenko of the World Bank expressed confidence that once Bangladesh makes progress on garment safety and develops a sustainable model for growth, it can easily take market share away from China.

The writer is an economist and writes regularly in this column on economic policy.

QUOTABLE Quote

HARUKI MURAKAMI
Kafka on the Shore

Listen up - there's no war that will end all wars.

CROSSWORD BY THOMAS JOSEPH

ACROSS

- Fossil resin
- Stately
- "Uncle Miltie"
- Bitter
- Panache
- Singer Crystal
- Opera set in Egypt
- April weather
- Massive amounts
- The Emerald Isle
- Granola bit
- Stupors
- Manger fill
- Broad comedy
- Escort to the exit
- Cry of insight
- Hardy heroine
- Macramé unit
- Night fliers
- Singer Tori
- Stellar hunter
- Bother
- Note from the boss
- Skiing spot
- Insertion symbol
- Annual visitor

DOWN

- Crunch targets
- Ran into
- Seven-time NHL All-Star
- Mystery writer peters
- Woodwind part
- Pester
- Simple wind instrument
- "Trumbo" star
- Leslie Caron film
- First place
- Oxygen: Prefix
- Fling
- Solemn promise
- Flat floater
- "Terrible" age
- Bounce back
- Theater unit
- Impressive
- Olympics jersey initials
- Eucalyptus eater
- Pear variety
- Open space
- Base meal
- Take in
- Suitable
- Pot fill

YESTERDAY'S ANSWER

E	C	H	O	S	P	L	A	S	H
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S	I	R	E	L	A	T	E	N	T
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O	M	E	L	E	T	R	H	E	A
W	A	T	E	R	Y	E	T	A	S

BEETLE BAILEY by Mort Walker

DIDN'T YOU SEE THE NO PARKING SIGN? NO

I'LL HAVE TO GIVE YOU A TICKET

CAN I HAVE A COPY FOR MY MEMORY BOOK?

BABY BLUES by Kirkman & Scott

LOOK WHO'S HERE. OH, HI, TREN'T.

ARE YOU GUYS HAVING A SLEEPOVER OR SOMETHING?

A SLEEPOVER? I DOUBT IT.

PROBABLY MORE OF A STAY-AWAKE-OVER.

OR A BIG-YOUR-SISTER-Δ-THON!