

An old disease we nurture so well



NO STRINGS ATTACHED
It may be prohibited by law (Dowry prohibition Act, 1980) but demanding dowry for deigning to marry a girl from a less fortunate family is considered a

normal entitlement of males in society. In villages, the law of the land means little as it is always the rules of the community created by the elders and the influential that matter. No wonder that thousands of women are subject to systematic torture at the hands of their husbands and in-laws when they fail to satisfy dowry demands. Sometimes they are burnt to death, sometimes maimed for life with acid, sometimes they just give up trying to survive the abuse and hang themselves. Those are the stories that make news, though the publicity has done little to stop this medieval practice that makes married life a living hell for so many young women in our country.

Perhaps the story of 20-year-old Parvin from a village in Jaldhaka upazilla, Nilphamari, would not have made the news had she not been rescued or had she succumbed to the torture. But the report sent by *The Daily Star's* Nilphamari correspondent, of Parvin, the daughter of a day labourer, who was confined to a room with her baby for five days without food, gives an idea of the level of sadism associated with the practice of dowry. The details of Parvin's ordeal reveals the way young women are treated when they enter their husband's home, especially if they are from poor families who believe daughters must be married off at any cost. The illusion that they will be fed better, have a roof over their heads and be safe from sexual predators, and of course dishonour, prompts families to literally give away their daughters to strangers, often along with a hefty payment in cash or kind or both. Sadly, though Parvin's family had given two lakh taka, a refrigerator, bed, steel



Will the torture ever end?

PHOTO: STAR

almirah and a milking cow to her husband and his family, this handsome dowry package was just not enough. Her husband Rokunuzzaman demanded another one lakh taka that she was pressurised to get from her father, and when she couldn't comply she was beaten up by him and his mother. The beatings got worse when she gave birth to a baby girl – a daughter who had no value in her husband's family. To complete the cycle of humiliation, her husband had an affair with another woman and with the encouragement of his mother, went ahead and started living with his mistress. Meanwhile, Parveen was locked up in a room and starved – she

thinks her mother-in-law was afraid that she would file a case against her husband for marrying again without her consent. So what was their plan one shudders to think. Starve her and her baby to death and then dump the bodies in some swamp? Or perhaps they could manage to make it look like a suicide coupled with infanticide? Or just declare her to be mad, of bad character and throw her out on the streets? Parvin was thankfully blessed by better fortune than many others facing similar torture. Some youths of her village informed the Jaldhaka UNO Rashedul Huq Prodhon who went to

the house and freed her and her baby. Thus, a tragedy was averted because of the conscientiousness of a few youths and a UNO. And we know of this story thanks to our Nilphamari correspondent who also managed to take a picture of an emaciated, visibly traumatised Parvin holding on to her little girl. Without that picture, this piece of news would have been blurred out by so many other news stories and would have become just another statistic of 'dowry related repression'. We, as passive bystanders of this despicable crime, may heave a sigh of relief – at least the woman was saved this time and surely the husband and

his mother will be punished by law. But in village culture things are not so clear-cut. Already there are rumours that village elders have urged Parvin's family to compromise, so that at least the marriage is preserved. So much concern for the sanctity of marriage! No doubt they will try to say that this is the best solution for Parvin and her daughter since she is from a poor family, and that a divorced woman is not looked upon favourably by society. Or maybe there will be an offer of monetary compensation to Parvin's family to keep their mouths shut and refrain from filing a case? These are all too familiar scenarios that ensure that men like Parvin's husband and women like her mother-in-law can get away with their horrendous crimes against helpless young women. Village communities are shockingly indulgent to perpetrators of violence against women and painfully unsympathetic to the victims, precisely because they are women. So how long are we going to accept the idea that women and girls must be sold at a price in the name of marriage? How long are we going to look the other way when they will be beaten, disfigured, starved or murdered because they couldn't satisfy the greed of their new 'owners'? When will we start shaming the dowry takers and the torturers and save our women from a life of continuous mental and physical trauma?

The prompt action of those young men and the UNO give a glimmer of hope that there are heroes even in those places that are buried in the dark ages where females have the lowest rank in the invisible caste system. These individuals should be honoured for defying the status quo that allows women's basic rights to be constantly violated. We salute these brave souls and pray that every person, in whatever individual capacity they possess, will emulate them and fight against the shameful practice of dowry and dowry related violence that law prohibits without enforcement and tradition condones.

The writer is Deputy Editor, Editorial & Op-ed, *The Daily Star*.

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The politics of misogyny

Americans and the world cannot afford to have someone in the Oval Office who practices and sanctions misogyny. Thus, it may now be exigent that a woman be elected to the presidency.



because politics is not my cup of tea! This does not mean that I have not been perturbed by the bizarre and bitter campaign rhetoric. Republican candidate Donald Trump has consistently attacked Muslims, Hispanics and African-Americans. But what has revolted me the most is his utter disrespect for women, despite the fact that they constitute about 53 percent of the electorate. His attitude is well documented in the *Access Hollywood* (2005) taped conversation with journalist Billy Bush, where he bragged in vulgar terms about kissing, groping and trying to have sex with women saying that "when you're a star, they let you do it!" Since the release of the tape, several women have come out and accused Trump of making unwelcome sexual advances. This notwithstanding, what has particularly riled me is the outrageous defense put up by Trump supporters. A female spokesperson for the Trump campaign declared unabashedly that American voters were

not interested in the sexual assault stories, but in "policies and real issues". I am no professed feminist, but as a person who believes in equal rights for women, I would like to highlight some of the "real issues" underlying Trump's misogynistic behaviour. Issues that not only affect women, but our society and our world:
1. Trump's derogatory comments about women cannot be waived off as mere locker room banter. For they reflect how men like Trump perceive women. More seriously, as the presidential nominee of one of the major political parties in the US, Donald Trump is expected to set the highest standard of probity. It is therefore pertinent to ask: Will "President Trump" serve as a role model for young people who learn by precept?
2. Trump is somewhat of a loose canon hurling insults at the media and minority groups. But when he calls his opponent "nasty" and a woman a "fat pig", he breaks an inviolable code of etiquette. After all, one of the first lessons in civility we teach our children is not to indulge in abusive name-calling. Social interaction must be guided by certain standards or else we would have a society where disrespect for a fellow human being, especially a woman, becomes the norm.
3. According to allegations, Trump's sexual misconduct extends to the



CARTOON: DAVE GRANLUND

workplace. For decades, women have been fighting against sexual harassment and exploitation with a fair degree of success. The fact that Trump's surrogates consider his predatory actions to be a non-issue is a serious blow for the movement to secure a respectful environment for women, both at work and outside.
4. Trump's wife Melania claimed in an interview that women "throw themselves" at her husband, implying that he is the victim, not the predator. This is, of course, the traditional male chauvinistic point of view where women are told that they need to protect themselves with taboos and "conservative" dress codes lest men are

tempted to "assault" them! Ironically, the man then becomes the prey and the woman the seductress.
5. Rather than apologise for his actions, Trump continues to call his accusers "liars". What he fails to comprehend is that a public disclosure by a sexual assault victim is like a violation of her body, once again! Thus Trump's scornful comments may act as a deterrent to many women who wish to identify or prosecute their sexual offenders.
The sad truth is that Donald Trump may have partially undone what social reformers have achieved through years of consolidated effort – a balance between masculine and feminine roles

and responsibilities with men and women living by well-defined codes of mutual respect. He may have thrown us back into the medieval era when women were objects of conquest and pleasure. He has successfully exploited the economic anxiety of a segment of the electorate by promising a country where immigrants, minorities and women will no longer be their competition. Unfortunately, his followers (even women) believe in this masculine, sexist image of a "Trumpian America". Whatever his supporters may say, we cannot deny that candidate Trump's disrespectful attitude and actions toward women are "real issues" in the presidential contest. Americans and the world cannot afford to have someone in the Oval Office who practices and sanctions misogyny. Thus, it may now be exigent that a woman be elected to the presidency. A woman who will make a loud and clear statement: I demand honour and respect because I am capable and I can do the job.
Fortunately, the American people have been given the opportunity to change the course of their destiny by rejecting Trump's sexist politics and electing their first female president. Hopefully, they will make the right choice for the sake of our daughters – and posterity!

The writer is a renowned Rabindra Sangeet exponent and a former employee of the World Bank.

QUOTABLE Quote

THURGOOD MARSHALL
Former Associate Justice of Supreme Court, USA

In recognising the humanity of our fellow beings, we pay ourselves the highest tribute.

CROSSWORD BY THOMAS JOSEPH

ACROSS
1 Hollowed out
6 Diet no-no, for some
10 Last letter
11 Low point
12 Plains grazer
13 Speculate
14 Crumb carriers
15 Patsy
16 John, to Elton
17 Sandy's bark
18 Lawn material
19 Produce
22 Place at the table
23 Shaving mishap
26 Suffers from overworking
29 Disfigure
32 Calendar box
33 Baiting stat
34 "Lose Yourself" rapper
36 Saddle part
37 Peaceful protest
38 Gin mixer
39 Operative
40 Make law
41 Middling

DOWN
42 Office fixtures
1 Metallic element
2 Foreboding
3 Make good as new
4 They may clash
5 Football's marino
6 Mob boss
7 Bye, in Baja
8 Fab Four drummer
9 Dog show category
11 "I don't find that amusing"
15 Hit show letters
17 Valedictorian, usually
29 Arrest
21 "My country -- of thee"
24 Long cigars
25 "Full Metal Jacket" director
27 Flock father
28 Colors slightly
29 Western plateaus
30 Pal, to Pedro
31 Church doings
35 Spanish tot
36 Sharpen
38 TV's Danson

BEETLE BAILEY by Mort Walker

WHEN SARGE STARTS TO YELL AT YOU, STICK THIS CANDY BAR IN HIS MOUTH TO SHUT HIM UP

I'LL TRY IT!

YOU HAVE TO BE QUICKER ON YOUR WITHDRAWAL

NOW YOU TELL ME!

GREG! MORT WALKER

BABY BLUES by Kirkman & Scott

I'D SURE LIKE TO GO OUT AND PLAY IN THE RAIN.

HAMMIE, YOU'D GET SOAKED TO THE SKIN AND COVERED IN MUD!

AND I WAS AFRAID YOU WOULDN'T UNDERSTAND.

YESTERDAY'S ANSWER

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