HUMAN RIGHTS DAY

"For the state, child marriage is a blot of shame for human rights"

Kazi Reazul Hoque, Chairman of the National Human Rights Commission (NHRC), talks to Nahela Nowshin of The Daily Star about the recent attacks on minorities around the country, the new draft law for child marriage and other rights issues.

The lack of access to justice is one of the overriding challenges in ensuring the fundamental rights of the citizen. Some of the factors are loopholes in the legal system, its cumbersome and complex nature and high costs. What is the potential for reform in the justice system in the current land-

Equality before law, of all religions, races, castes, sexes, etc., is enshrined in the Constitution of the People's Republic of Bangladesh. Article 28(4) of the Constitution, in particular, states that nothing shall prevent the state from making special provisions for the betterment of women, children and other marginalised communities. We already have such laws in place but they are not implemented effectively. So there is ample space for reform upon further scrutiny.

Recently, we witnessed vicious communal attacks on the Hindu community in Nasirnagar and the Santal community in Gaibandha. What is the way forward to ensure that the rights of these minorities aren't further infringed upon?

Our team who went and spoke to locals in Nasirnagar observed that the attacks on the Hindu temples were orchestrated and people were purposefully instigated into vandalising structures. Needless to say, local law enforcement officials had a key role and a

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Kazi Reazul Hoque, Chairman of the National Human Rights Commission (NHRC)

burden of responsibility in anticipating and containing such an escalating situation. They failed to do so. Because of their carelessness, even Hindu families were brutally attacked and their personal property destroyed.

The way in which members of the Santal community—who went in to stop some locals from cutting sugarcane-were driven out by the administration and influentials of the area, was illegal. More important than how the

Santals entered the piece of land is how they were forced out by violent means. The collusion of law enforcement officials, in particular, with local leaders in abusing the Santals is actually a criminal offence.

The state should deal with such acts of violence with an iron fist, regardless of the involvement of law enforcement officials or individuals wielding political power. Only then will a sense of security among these minorities be

restored. If we fail to stand by these poor, marginalised communities and be their ally, then it will create fear among these peoples.

There is hope since the High Court has delivered some verdicts such as allowing Santals to harvest their paddy and for [Rangpur Sugar] mill authorities to give Santals their paddy after it has been sowed.

In the case of Nasirnagar, the OC who was on duty was removed and prompt action was taken against those found guilty. This is a positive sign. If we can continue the process of holding perpetrators accountable for their actions, then we can ensure these minorities protection of their constitutional rights.

You have been quite vocal about the provision in the proposed Child Marriage Restraint Act which allows marriage of under-18 girls under special circumstances.

We held consultation meetings with various stakeholders and submitted a draft based on our findings to the Ministry of Women and Children Affairs. We clearly stated that the marriageable age of girls cannot be brought down under 18 under any circumstance. Any deviation from the minimum legal marriageable ages of 18 and 21 for girls and boys respectively may be considered a violation of the rights of children.

For the state, child marriage is a blot of shame for human rights. A girl child has the right to a full-fledged education, to enjoy all the joys of childhood, and the protection of her parents. Child marriage leads to the deprivation of those rights. The rate of child marriage in the country was at 66 percent and we were able to bring it down to 42 percent. The marriageable age of girls then was 18 too. All the progress we have made might be in vain if this new provision, that allows for exceptions of girls under 18 to be married at the request of parents, is not removed. I request the concerned authorities and lawmakers to review the proposed draft. Rights groups, activists and the

media have been fighting for justice for families of victims of enforced disappearance. These cases remain unsolved and are quite disturbing in that they create a climate of fear and uncertainty.

We have to remember that human rights constitute the right to life, right to liberty, right to equality and right to dignity of a person. Cases of involuntary disappearance simply trample upon these basic rights. At the end of the day, it is the state's responsibility to ensure that people's constitutional rights are protected and laws are properly implemented so that they act as a deterrent against such crimes.

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365 Days of Human Rights Activism

Ending violence against women and girls

JANE EDMONDSON

S this year's 16 days of activism on violence against women draws to a L close, it is a good time to reflect on why we need this annual push.

I grew up in a place and time - the UK in the 70s - when equality for women seemed to be fast approaching. Equal pay laws were introduced. Family planning was enabling more If we want to women to have careers and economic independence. More women were entering politics one becoming Prime Minister.

> We have read similar stories from across the world in the last few decades. Here in Bangladesh we have seen progress in improving the lives of women and girls, not least by getting as many girls as boys enrolled in primary school and reducing maternal and infant mortality. The Government of Bangladesh has a National Plan of Action for tackling violence against women and girls and has brought in legislation such as the Domestic Violence (Prevention and Protection) Act 2010.

But despite women having more opportunities for education and formal employment, the country still sees high levels of violence against women and girls. More than 80 percent of married Bangladeshi women are abused at least once during their marriage, be it physical, sexual, emotional or financial abuse, and most often from someone they know and should be able to trust. Survivors face severe and life-long physical and mental health problems. Violence and stigma rip apart family life.

It also has a negative economic impact. For example, in 2010 Bangladeshi families experiencing domestic violence spent an average USD 163.50 each to get help, mostly on medical services. The total annual cost borne by households in Bangladesh was estimated in 2010 as



ILLUSTRATION: TOM JELLET

2.1 percent of GDP, or USD 2.4 billion.

If we want to do something for the one in three women and girls around the world who experience violence in their lifetime we need to change minds and behaviours. We need to challenge the lower value placed women and girls, and the discrimination, inequality and sexual and gender-based violence that flows from that.

The 16 days of activism doesn't just put a spotlight on the devastating effects of violence. They highlight what can be achieved if action is taken.

In my few months here I have already met some of the bravest women I have ever come

across - women who have escaped terrible violence, rebuilt their lives and are taking a stand. One woman had been badly abused by her husband and then thrown out of her home. Her family had rejected her. With help from a local organisation that UK Aid supports, she was able to get health, skills training and other support for herself and her children, and build a new livelihood rearing livestock. She had done so well that she was employing other women. Newly prosperous, she found her husband and her family wanting her back. She was having none of it. Counselling and financial independence had given her confidence and freedom.

Women's empowerment, and their ability to

take up productive work outside the household, is good for the wider world too. It fuels economic growth and reduces poverty. But until we eliminate violence against women and girls, too many of them will be excluded from that. It is against this backdrop that the UK has recognised

the need to raise investment. In announcing at the start of the 16 days of activism an additional 6m pound of UK Aid to eliminate violence against women and girls, the UK's Secretary of State for International Development, Priti Patel said: "We cannot and will not tolerate any form of violence

against women and girls. Britain is leading efforts across 30 countries... from ending female genital mutilation and child marriage to preventing domestic abuse. UK Aid already helps survivors in some of the world's poorest countries - now we are stepping up our global leadership and support to protect even more women and girls and address the root causes of violence".

Here in Bangladesh, tackling violence against women and girls is a top priority for UK Aid. Our focus is to stop violence before it starts, by supporting women's and girls' education, health and economic empowerment, so that girls and women can achieve their full potential.

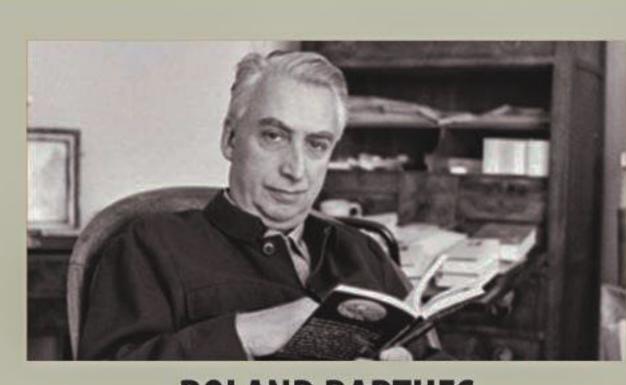
We also support victims of violence, ensuring they have access to security, justice and health services. Our programmes create job opportunities for survivors, helping them to be reintroduced to society. They give attention to work with men and boys to tackling social norms that result in gender-based violence and early marriage.

Successes include giving more than 45,000 female victims of violence access to medical and /or legal assistance. UK support has arranged more than 11,000 dowryfree marriages and prevented 13,000 early marriages (girls under 18 years). We also supported the Acid Survivors' Foundation to significantly reduce acid violence from a high of 494 recorded attacks affecting 496 victims in 2002 to 59 attacks affecting 74 victims in 2015. This shows that when action is taken with enough energy, change can happen and fast.

As a partner of the Government of Bangladesh, and on the international day marking the importance of Human Rights for all, the UK Government asserts that everyone benefits from ending violence against women and girls, both economically and socially. We look forward to working with our partners here to ensure the end of the 16 days of activism marks the beginning of even more action in the other 349 days of the year.

The writer is Head of DFID-Bangladesh Twitter: @JaneEdm_DFID

QUOTABLE Quote



ROLAND BARTHES FRENCH LITERARY THEORIST, PHILOSOPHER,

LINGUIST, CRITIC, AND SEMIOTICIAN

We know that the war against intelligence is always waged in the name of common sense.

CROSSWORD BY THOMAS JOSEPH

ACROSS

1 Swindle 5 Surgery memento

9 Inlets

11 Beach setting 12 Scarlett's last name

13 Berry of film

14 Parking place 15 Wrangled

17 Talked like a Texan

19 They hold power 20 Grove makeup

21 "Aw, shucks!"

22 Pallid 24 Spoil

26 "Halt!" from a salt 29 Decline

30 Moved on all fours

32 Fished with a net 34 Purpose

35 Bewildered

36 Best of the best

38 Out of bed 39 Chopped up

40 Scissors sound

41 Turner and Danson DOWN

1 Baul out

2 Colleague 3 Film set on Pandora

4 Sea, to Simone

5 "Pygmalion" playwright

6 Lassie, for one

7 Francis of TV

8 Marsh plants

10 Dark-furred martens

11 Herring's kin 16 Divide and divide again

18 Dress in

21 Act the rodent 23 Steered clear of

24 Purple swallow 25 1992 Wimbledon champ

27 Water channel 28 Tried out

29 Flag features 30 Large family

31 Actions

33 Show sorrow

37 Ignited

YESTERDAY'S ANSWER BASICS

ASAP A C E APPLEBUTTER SASHA HITS SCAN PUREED BAH DOME TOOL AIRS BLAZE COCOABUTTER CREOLE ALOT SERGIO PEWS

ANY PRIME LOCATION IN DHAKA ONLY THE LAND OWNER(S) ARE REQUESTED TO CONTACT শেল্টেক্ SHELTECH 01713-091719, 01713-091721