

Editor (The Daily Star)
Mahfuz Anam

Editor (Star Weekend)
(Dilshad) Elita Karim

Staff Writers
Md Shahnawaz Khan Chandan
Fayeka Zabeen Siddiqua
Naziba Basher
Apurba Jahangir
Nilima Jahan

Columnist
Osama Rahman

Staff Photographer
Kazi Tahsin Agaz Apurbo

Graphics & Illustrations
Manan Morshed

Make-up
Md Saiful Islam

Production
Shamim Chowdhury

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“The fight is won or lost far away from witnesses - behind the lines, in the gym, and out there on the road, long before I dance under those lights.”
-Muhammad Ali, Boxer

SNAPSHOT

| INITIATIVE |

ACCEPTING DIVERSITY INCLUSION FOR ONE AND ALL

SYEDA SAMARA MORTADA

ILLUSTRATION: ATHIR RAHMAN

Share-net Bangladesh, a knowledge platform, organised the first discussion of its kind that focused upon SRHR (Sexual Reproductive Health Rights) for the disabled. It also shed light upon the need to create an inclusive approach to the underserved needs of SRHR for people with disabilities. One of the main outcomes from this meeting was the need to collaborate amongst organisations that work on the said topic and also advocate for the cause to relevant stakeholders.

Globally, many discussions have been held on SRHR on different contexts. However, in Bangladesh, focusing primarily on disabled people is still a new concept. Yet, when I observe a room full of activists and development practitioners rendering over diversity, a change is bound to take place.

Representatives from various development organisations were present during the meeting. Many of them belong to the disabled community themselves. Thus, they were able to shed light upon the subject matter based on personal experiences. A number of members stressed upon issues like the importance of inclusion, social stigma, physical barriers, discrimination, lack of advocacy, information rights and their needs and more. They also expressed the desire to speak for themselves instead of others doing it for them. The following is a list of some organisations who are working on SRHR for the disabled.

Turning Point Foundation

Turning Point Foundation strives for diversity, equity and inclusion for a sustainable development. The organisation has been named 'Turning Point' from the core believe that when faced with difficulties and disappointment - there is still scope to turn towards hope.

Jibon Gomes, Executive Director of Turning Point Foundation, says, “No



matter what kind of disability we have, first and foremost, we are human beings and should be able to attain our fundamental rights.” He also points out the lack of adequate research, data and programs, along with the gaps present in government policies regarding SRHR of disabled people.

Center for Disability in Development (CDD)

It is estimated that 16 million people in Bangladesh are living with a disability,

receiving little or no assistance and are excluded from mainstream life. CDD's mission is to address this by simultaneously educating the community on how to be more inclusive whilst also enabling people with disability to participate in society by providing them with essential support. In this way, people with disabilities can be given the same rights, freedom, dignity and quality of life as everyone else.

“Children with disability are tremendously vulnerable to sexual abuse,”

said Anika Rahman Lipy, Assistant Director of CDD. Lipy talks about how the behavior of disabled children changes as they grow up and how after reaching puberty, undergo many emotional and physical changes that are often misunderstood and ignored by parents, elders and the society in general.

Women with Disabilities Development Foundation (WDDF)

WDDF was founded with an effort to home-grow a group of prospective women leaders with disabilities, so that they can advocate for the cause themselves.

Shirin Akhter, Chairman of WDDF, speaks about her personal experience while seeking for public health services. She has encountered ignorance and preconceived notions towards disabled people. “It puts them at a greater risk of facing sexual and mental abuse,” she says.

Global Platform Bangladesh

Global Platform Bangladesh is Action Aid's training hub that focuses on youth leadership, governance, campaigning and activism. In the “SDG and Youth” training, one of the participating groups' work focuses on “SRHR for Disabled People”. It will advocate and raise awareness through media sensitisation and social media campaigns. Group members Syeda Samara Mortada, Swarna Moi, Farah Moriam, Shimul Siddiquee and Shahida Akter Shorna are advocating for the cause, while trying to identify means of reaching the policy and decision makers. Samara stresses, “Although the government's 7th five-year-plan focuses on social inclusion, safety nets and education for disabled people, there is a dearth of SRHR inclusion when it comes to the disabled.”

Working for SRHR has now become recognised and is seen as an essential subject to ponder upon in the context of Bangladesh. However, when it comes to disability inclusion, there is still a great lack in awareness and of course, in implementation. To eradicate these, lobbying with policy makers and acknowledging the fact that disabled people also have rights, including SRHR, would help in solving the issue.

If you believe in equality for all, stand up for the rights of the disabled people. Wake up, take your stand! ■

MAILBOX

thestarmagazine@gmail.com



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BLAST FROM THE PAST

As a professor and researcher at the University of Dhaka and an avid reader of the Star Weekend, my attention was drawn to Rahat Abrar's brief write up published under the title 'Blast from the Past' in Mailbox corner of Star Weekend dated February 3, 2017. There are some void and lacunae in this writing which needs to be set right. Researchers and scholars over a considerable period of time conducted research studies (including myself) which revealed that within 5 years or so of the establishment of Dhaka University, there has been a burgeoning of socio-cultural vis-a-vis literary activities centering the then residential halls particularly the Muslim Hall (later on Salimullah Muslim Hall). In June 1926 the Muslim Shahittya Samaj (Muslim Literary Society) was founded in the Muslim Hall Union office room. The protagonists of this society were the then young, energetic and literary minded personalities such as Shahidullah (later on Dr. Shahidullah), Abul Hossain, the first Muslim lecturer of the then Department of Commerce and Economics, of Dhaka University, Kazi Motahar Hossain of Physics Department (later on the founder of Statistics Department), Kazi Abdul Wadud, legendary Professor of Bengali literature and so on. In conjunction with a host of other

like-minded cultural activists, they organised the “Buddhir Mukti Andolon” (Movement for the Emancipation of Minds) which professed and propagated the lofty ideals of humanism, secularism, rationalism and above all emancipation of intellect. By far the most striking aspect of the movement was the stress on using Bengali in all written and oral activities. Thus Shikha the annual mouthpiece of the society was essentially published in Bengali and carried weighty and thought-provoking articles and poems which were directed against social excesses in the name of Islam, obscurantism, outdated ideas and thoughts. Five issues of Shikha were published from 1927 to 1932.

In fact this was the first

progressive movement of East Bengal centering Dhaka University which petered out after a parlous existence of twelve years in the face of stiff opposition by obscurantist, the mentors of old order and vested interests. Put in its proper perspective the pioneering free thinkers movement- “Buddhir Mukti Andolon” is Dhaka University's best contribution towards the social and intellectual awakening in this region as it set in motion the forces which shaped into the Language Movement (1948-52) and ultimately the glorious Liberation War of 1971.

Dr. Mohammad Tawfiqul Haider Professor and former Chairman, Department of Islamic History and Culture, University of Dhaka

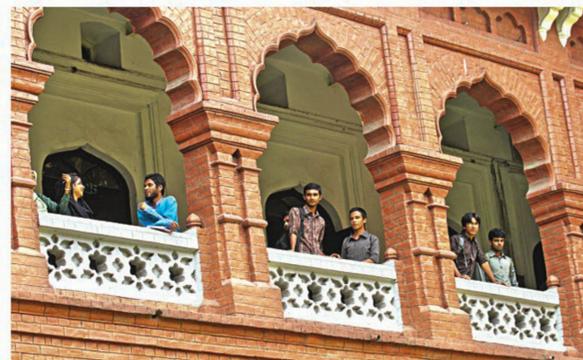


PHOTO: PRABIR DAS

The opinions expressed in these letters do not necessarily represent the views of the Star Weekend.

A Life Changing Journey

What an amazing experience it was to read the article titled 'A Life Changing Journey' in the Star Weekend issue of February 10, 2017. I was glued into reading the story about activities taken up by a team of people who are still in their last leg of studies. However, they decided, while carrying on with their studies, to embark upon a journey to change the lives of downtrodden young children and poor women. We, the people of Bangladesh, can see some good things happening through our young generations when they come forward selflessly and do something for the impoverished people. Kudos to all the team members belonging to It's Humanity Foundation (IHF). Best wishes to all of them in their mission to achieve their thoughtful and desired goals.
Mashudul Haque
Central Road, Dhaka