

Rights of our girls and women

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On September 25, 2015, at the end of the deadline for the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs), the UN General Council drew up Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) in their place. One of the criticisms of MDGs was that the issues of women's rights had not been wholly included. Surpassing this criticism, achieving gender equality by removing all forms of violence and discrimination against women and girl children has been identified as the top priority of the 17 SDGs and the pledge to "leave no one behind" has been taken. The fifth goal is to achieve gender equality and to empower women and girl children. Under this goal, the objectives to remove all forms of discrimination against women and girl children, to stop all forms of personal violence including trafficking and sexual harassment, and to eliminate harmful social practices such as child

the rights of all women labourers including migrant women, and creation of a safe work environment have been stated. Goal 11 (sustainable city and population) puts emphasis on ensuring secure, accessible, and affordable transportation for women and children. Goal 16 (peace and justice) talks about the right to access to justice for everyone and building effective and accountable organisations at all levels. In these ways, different aspects of women's rights have been included in the SDGs. Bangladesh has had considerable success in achieving MDG objectives. In terms of achieving the SDGs, Bangladesh has demonstrated strong political commitment. The Planning Commission has already taken up different strategic initiatives regarding this.

To achieve the SDGs related to women and girl children, Bangladesh government needs to consider some issues with importance. It is undeniable that Bangladesh has achieved some progress in improving the condition of women in the last few decades, espe-

cially in regards to increasing women's education rate, achieving gender equality in primary education, and reducing the rate of maternal and infant mortality and birth. In spite of this, equal opportunities for men and women in educational and professional sectors have not been created. Women are behind in higher education, skills development, and technical education. On the other hand, women and girl children are being constantly subjected to many forms of discrimination and violence in their daily lives. In our society, a girl grows up experiencing different forms of discrimination since birth. Since there are no effective and comprehensive steps taken on the state level to remove these types of discrimination, violence against women and girl children continues to exist. Thus, women's education, political and economic empowerment, reform of social conducts, provisions and state laws and policies that outlaw discrimination against women and their effective implementation are needed. In our society, we see that discriminatory family

laws are greatly undermining women's rights, but avoid the topic using the excuse of hurting religious sentiments. Women's right to property is still following Islamic or other religious inheritance laws for citizens of other religions. We have made Hindu marriage registration dependent on the willingness of both the bride and groom rather than making it mandatory whereas registration of Muslim marriage is still mandatory and not registering is considered punishable. In our country, the family laws are managed according to everyone's respective religion. Even though the civil society has been urging to enact a universal family law with equal rights in marriage, divorce, alimony, custody of children, adoption, and inheritance to remove longstanding discrimination towards women in society, no government administration has paid any heed to this. Rather, restrictions have been placed on Article 2 and 16.1 (c) of the UN Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW). On November 8 of

ernment is not able to take any positive steps in fear of retaliation from the religious groups is not an acceptable argument. Rather, keeping the restriction on the CEDAW convention is an obvious violation of the Constitution of Bangladesh and the state's promise to protect the rights of women. The government's political commitment should be the regulator in this case. Whereas many other Muslim countries do not consider these articles to be against the Quran or Sunnah, the government's stand makes the religious groups stronger in reality. Until the state ensures equal rights, we cannot expect desired results in establishing women's rights.

The dominance, degree, and pattern of abuse and violence against women have become matters of deep anxiety. There are quite a few progressive initiatives, laws, policies, and court orders to stop violence against women, namely, Women and Children Violence Protection Law 2000, Domestic Violence (Prevention and Protection) Act 2010, court order to prevent sexual harassment, court declaration of fatwas as extrajudicial punishment, order to stop physical punishment in educational institutions, Pornography Control Act 2012, Children Act 2013, abolishment of two-finger test or virginity test, hotline to prevent child abuse, etc. It's regrettable that abuse of women and girl children is increasing rather than decreasing everyday even after these initiatives.

The primary barrier to stop violence against women is thought to be weak application of law and delays in the judiciary. Again, women's rights consciousness, sensitivity, and infrastructural development in the structure of society and state are not yet present to that degree, resulting in a lot of clashes. Looking back at last year only, the horrifying picture of violence against women and girl children emerges before our eyes. Tonu was raped and murdered in the secured area of a cantonment and the killers are yet to be apprehended. Risha died from stabs by a stalker in the capital. Khadija had to fight death for many days after being stabbed. Five-year-old Puja was a victim of rape and brutal torture.

A horrifying view of violence against women can be seen in a report by the One Stop Crisis Centre published in the media. According to the report, 22,386 women and children were admitted to 10 government hospitals during 2001-2015 after being victims of rape and other forms of violence. A third of these victims are children, 80 percent of whom are victims of rape, while the others are victims of violence as housemaids. 5,003 cases have been filed, but judgement has been given for 820 cases and only 101 offenders have been punished. In other words, only 3.66 percent of cases have been completely settled and 0.45 percent of offenders have been brought to justice. On the other hand, according to Violence against Women Survey 2015 by Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics, close to 80 percent of women become victims of abuse by their husbands at least once in their marital life. This abuse is of many types - physical, sexual, economic, and emotional. There are social and organisational barriers of many degrees in the way of women getting justice in a culture of impunity, which in effect is accelerating violence against women.

The government's recent efforts to add a new special provision to the Child Marriage Restraint Act, instead of making the current legal and organisational structure stronger to remove discrimination and violence against women, will make the situation worse for women, especially girl children, making them more vulnerable to violence. This special provision is in conflict with the constitutional right of the citizens of Bangladesh to protection of fundamental rights, getting equal opportunity before the law (Article 27), and not being subject to gender discrimination (Article 28). We have defined anyone under the age of 18 as a child according to the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child and our laws, yet we are leaving scope for marriage of girl children under 18. The most pressing concern is that every girl child is said to be underage in the special provision and there is no age limit. Along with that, "best interests of the child" are mentioned here but there is no clear explanation of what that means. Even though different government sources have brought up the issue of pre-marital impregnation or elopement of girls and boys as arguments, these events are very few in number in

our country. Besides, this issue has been mentioned in the Children Act 2013 and its draft rules along with the issue of following the principle of the best interests of the child. Also, there is mention of a Child Protection Committee from the district level to the ward level, one of the responsibilities of which is to stop child marriage and help the child and his/her family in case of a special situation. So "marriage" is not a solution to this problem. It is not even clear at what age, marriage of children may be permitted by the court.

If this law is passed, it will threaten everything the government has achieved in protecting women's rights so far. Child marriage is already a great barrier to the growth and development of our girl children. According to the statistics by the International Centre for Research on Women, Bangladesh is third in the world in terms of child marriage of children under 18. We learnt from a report by UNICEF that the percentage of marriage among children under 15 is 18 and the percentage of marriage among children under 18 is 52. If the law is passed, this rate will rise further. Education and physical and mental growth of girl children will be hampered. In poor and middle income countries, one of the main reasons of death among girl children aged 15-19 is complexity during pregnancy and child

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birth. Instead of building an educated, healthy, and dignified human and a worthy citizen of the country, we are pushing girl children towards physical danger and a dishonourable and dependent life. The government should pass the law without any conditions as soon as possible. Along with that, they should conduct extensive awareness programmes that highlight the harmful aspects of child marriage and the provisions for punishment included in this law.

Last year marked the 32nd year of Bangladesh's ratification of the CEDAW convention. Bangladesh ratified this convention in 1984. Now is the time to look back and find out why Bangladesh is still considerably behind in implementing the convention as well as in removing all forms of discrimination against women at the national level. Again, if the state's stand is not at par with women's consciousness of their own rights, conflict of mutual understanding will make the situation even more complex. We hope that the state's commitment to protect women's rights will pick up the pace and women and girl children will be able to contribute more to the development of the country and the nation by honing their own potential in a fearless and violence free environment without any discrimination.

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marriage and forced marriage, have been set. Along with that, emphasis has been given on ensuring opportunity for women's complete and effective participation and leadership in taking decisions in every sector of political, economic, and public life, national level reform for women's equal rights to property, and enacting laws and policies for equality and empowerment of women and girl children at all levels. Besides, in the third goal (health and wellbeing), quite a few objectives have been set to ensure healthcare for women and children worldwide, namely, reducing the rate of maternal and infant mortality, providing reproductive healthcare, etc. On the other hand, emphasis has been put on removing gender discrimination in the education sector and ensuring quality education for all boy and girl children and equal opportunities for men and women in technical education in the fourth goal (quality education). In the eighth goal (economic growth), dignified work and equal wages for women, preservation of

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last year, the review committee of implementation of CEDAW reviewed the eighth report of the Bangladesh government in Geneva. In this review, Bangladesh government made it clear to the CEDAW committee that restrictions on Article 2 and 16.1 (c) will not be withdrawn. In the interim report by the government, the reason for not withdrawing restrictions was said to be pressure from religious groups. According to the government, divorce and property distribution is done according to religious guidelines in this Muslim majority country. Even though the government has made promises to withdraw the objection at times in the CEDAW committee review or at the national level, it has made no promises this time, disappointing us all. Note that in 2013, the Law Commission had reviewed the articles in question and recommended withdrawal of the objection. That the government has not considered the recommendation is clear from its current stand. However, that the gov-