

Pollution: killer of children

When will causes be mitigated?

ACCORDING to the World Health Organisation (WHO), pollution in its many manifestations is killing some 280,000 children in Bangladesh annually. Outdoor pollution is very high because of construction work and high numbers of vehicles. What many people don't realise is that indoor pollution is also a major cause for fatalities because across the country we use fossil fuel for cooking. These are some of the findings of the WHO reports "Inheriting a Sustainable World: Atlas on Children's Health and the Environment" and "Don't pollute My Future! The impact of the Environment on Children's Health."

There remains so much we can do at a country level that is not being done. The polluting effects of brick kilns are known to all and yet we continue to allow them to operate using polluting-techniques. Children are particularly vulnerable to all sorts of ailments because their immune system simply cannot cope with so much pollution. The reports outline the damage caused to children as they are exposed to second hand smoke when outdoors and this exposure in a polluted environment is passed onto the child while still in the mother's womb because she is inhaling toxic air.

What have authorities done to reduce the number of unfit vehicles on the road or brick kilns operating on the city's periphery? Where are the environmental controls stated in the various laws that are supposed to protect our rivers from pollution? How long will we allow our children to die because the agencies fail to enforce enacted legislations? Those are 280,000 deaths that could be avoided or the number certainly drastically reduced if we chose to act decisively.

The scar of forced marriage

Let HER decide

A recent household survey conducted by Oxfam among 330 households in four districts of the country reveals that forty-nine percent of women had not given consent to their parents to go ahead with their marriages. It speaks volumes about the wide prevalence of forced marriage as well as women's inferior position in the society. Forced marriage is often associated with child marriage as the survey shows that average age of marriage of the surveyed women was 16 years. It is also identified as a major reason behind the high rate of domestic violence in the country.

Though forced marriage is a criminal offence in the country, there is little enforcement of the legal provisions against this social malaise. The recently passed Child Marriage Restraint Act has only exacerbated the fear as there is scope of misusing the "special provision" which stipulates that a child can be married off in "special circumstances". And it is obvious that a girl child will have very little say about her marriage in such "special circumstances". There is a widespread demand to repeal this provision and this paper also holds a similar view about the issue. On this occasion of the International Women's day, we reiterate our call to make a better world where every woman can exercise her right to choose when to marry as well as take every decision in her life.

Confessions of a feminist



IT is strange penning a column on a day that celebrates women. Considering that there's one day, November 19, which is known as "International Men's Day" and the fact that no one pays any attention to it, I suggest we women go all out and celebrate that particular day and voice out our worries and concerns about how weak, underpaid, unsung men just happen to be. After all, it is the era of "fake news". So, if women were to start a website of "fake news", the first news would presumably be of men's demand for equality. Let's be serious. If women are being celebrated this one day only because the "others feel" they are not the rest of the year, and if we women feel the pain and sense of deprivation, then it's probably right to mark the 8th of the third month every year. And just in case we don't, in case we don't feel that it's worth to be called in for interviews, talk shows and being written about, then let's just stop. Let's just stop accepting that it's okay to run special supplements on us this day, that it's okay having the spotlight only for 24 hours out of 8,760 hours in a year, that it's ok not to inspire the young women with motivational punch lines. Let's just stop.

Amidst all the ironies in the world, the most celebrated and talked about issue is one about inequality. It's about how the world is divided because of unfavourable wealth distribution, unequal pay for women, unequal opportunities for the underprivileged, etc. All these "un"s spring up throughout the year with special focus on women in March. This year, much to my surprise, I started being a part of this discourse at the end of February.

In the third week of February, an international conference on women focused on how to mentor the young. In one of the table discussions, I decided to share what I couldn't have shared on the

podium. I told a few young scholars how difficult it is to walk the rope being a woman, lest we fall. I told them that being a woman is being like a critical accessory to a circus called the world, where a woman is not to falter, where she is expected to walk the line, balancing home and work, and never questioning the role. That's right. Women play their part in a well rehearsed speech and go through life without any intermissions or commercial breaks. This is something I shared on the table, but could not when I went to the podium. There are things you don't share when you are in "public." After all, from our childhood, we women have been

of a woman ends with a woman asking for equal pay. And the story began long ago. Let's face it. If decades ago, Alfred Marshall, the famous economist could threaten saying that men wouldn't marry women if they competed against them, if the World Economic Forum recently could predict that gender gap can't be overcome till the year 2186, if a Polish Member of Parliament, even a few days back could actually call women: weak and less intelligent even in 2017 and slap claims of equality down, do women really have hope?

Yes, we do. And the only hope lies within us. It's time to start a #SheForShe

She said that it was difficult to carry extra yards with her while she was carrying the extra recording accessories. I got her point. When I asked her more about her reservations, she further vented: she said that most of her male colleagues thought that she was a pretty face and just wearing a lipstick and reading the news would do her job. I asked her about her usual reaction and realised that she had fire in her. She said that most of the times, she talks back and asks them to try a shade of lipstick out themselves and check if viewers liked him or her better. Maybe it's time for males to look prettier than us. She had made her point.

Young women like her inspire me. Instead of a few being showcased, instead of a few being under the spotlight, it's time to pay attention to the young who truly define and lead us all. I have no hesitation in admitting that my daughters and their likes have more courage, gumption and conviction than I ever had. They teach me more than I had ever taught them. They converse in an audacious language of freedom that I have never associated with. They disallow the concept of unfair compromises which many of us have self-embraced.

This is officially the 106th year of International Women's Day celebrations, though it all started with 15,000 women marching the streets of New York and only officially came into existence in 1910 with one woman in Germany tabling the idea of IWD. But personally, I revolt internally every time there is a formal discourse of freedom and rights of women, just because we have ourselves not been bold enough to change anything. Most of us gave in rather than argue our cases; many of us protested and earned wrath instead; a few even managed and manipulated their existence and called for truce. In all honesty, the feminist narrative of ours needs to undergo change. If there's any change that's expected to happen, women need to initiate that themselves for women; expecting a male counterpart's empathy to win a war isn't being smart. It's just being lazy.

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It's time to start a #SheForShe movement. Unless women just stop expecting men to help them realign their statuses, then victory for women will always remain elusive. The only way is to help each other out, increase mentorship programmes and impact each other's lives.

taught to acknowledge the difference between the "public" and the "private". So, in that public space, I had drawn a sub-public and sub-private space and had shared differently. In that public space, most women often talked about the elusive picture-perfect scenario, where the audience was expected to be inspired by the idea of a successful parenthood, successful marriage and successful career. All's well at the end. Well, that's not how all cases appear in reality. From the first moment of saying "khub" (I do) while exchanging marriage vows, to the moment of delivering a child, down to the last moment of being bade goodbye, the society looks upon a woman with a certain degree of reverence till the time a woman asks for an equal place in the economy. The scent

movement. Unless women just stop expecting men to help them realign their statuses, then victory for women will always remain elusive. The only way is to help each other out, increase mentorship programmes and impact each other's lives. This is a common message that is being voiced out everywhere. A young journalist came into our office the other day and had a bunch of questions to ask. Most of them related to the general angle: Did you have problems becoming a female entrepreneur? What do you think is the way ahead? I was loyal to her questions and answered quite dutifully. However, as we ended our formal interview, she felt easy enough to share how she feels violated every time she doesn't carry a "dupatta" or scarf with her when she is wearing a shirt and jeans and is also carrying a backpack.

Against all odds they fight



ON this International Women's Day, I want to remember Nasima, Dolly, Shyamoli and all those women who did not allow violence and discrimination to break them, but rather gave them strength to stand up and fight back. In the course of our work we come across many such brave women, who, in spite of suffering the most horrific forms of violence such as rape, gang rape, acid attacks, stalking, sexual harassment etc. continue to persevere and turn their lives around. My article today is a tribute to them and all the women in Bangladesh who struggle everyday of their lives to make this world a better place for themselves and their families.

Below is such a story. Shyamoli from Tangail faced physical and mental torture from her spouse and in-laws just after her marriage in 2001. Torture on her increased after she gave birth to a girl child, till one day she was beaten severely and thrown out of the house. She returned to her father's home penniless and with a child to take care of. At one point, she decided to stand up against violence and torture against women. She gradually became a strong voice on behalf of victims of violence and got involved in preventing child marriage, dowry, domestic violence etc. She also started to participate in local shalish to ensure justice for women and over time began to be considered as a community leader. Shyamoli decided to become economically self sufficient and started a small yarn/thread business and set up a weaving machine. Gradually, her business grew and she now employs ten people, earns Tk. 16,000-18,000 a month with a bank savings of Tk. 120,000. She sends her little girl to school and looks forward to a better life for her child.

In Bangladesh, the picture of violence and discrimination against women is grim. Women continue to face discrimination and violence in their private and public lives. The Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics study in 2015 reported that 72 percent women experience some form of violence while 49.6 percent face physical violence by their spouse or close relatives. Fifty-two percent (UNICEF) girls are married before the age of 17 or 18. As per report of Ain O Salish, a total of 671 girls and women were raped and 191 were murdered by their husband or relatives from January 20 till November 2016.

However, this does not tell the entire story about the lives of women in Bangladesh. Today, more than ever before women are moving ahead in careers that was not thought possible even 20 years ago. There are now over 8,000 women in the police force and women are flying fighter



Women hold lit candles at midnight to mark International Women's Day last year. Amrai Pari, a campaign against domestic violence, in association with Dhaka University, organised the event with the slogan *Andhar Bhangar Sapath* (pledge to get rid of darkness).

jets besides going on Peace Missions alongside their male colleagues. Two women successfully climbed the Himalayan peaks and our girls are making a mark in sports and other forms of athletics. Labour force participation has steadily increased and besides the four million in the garment sector, other opportunities have opened up such as the service industry, agricultural sector etc. These women have not allowed patriarchal norms and beliefs to stifle their ambitions to lead productive and independent lives. There are others who, in spite of suffering violence and abuse, have been able to turn their lives around.

The question is why have discrimination and violence against women not gone down in spite of two powerful women being head of government for the last 25 years? How come the mass population has no problem accepting the leadership of women in public offices, yet, are so reluctant to share power or to accept equal relationship with their female counterparts, be it spouse, colleague or friend? The answer lies in the fact that essentially the mindset and attitude of society has not changed. The sad truth is women continue to be perceived as weak, dependent and unreliable. They are still shackled to customs, traditions and norms that dictate what women can or cannot do. Although educated middle class women have attained a measure of economic and social empowerment, yet many succumb to tradition and custom when

choosing a career or life partner. For women to be truly empowered and achieve equality in private and public life, certain conditions have to be met simultaneously. Most important is of course political commitment. Given the policies and laws enacted during the present regime one can say that there is indeed political commitment at the top level. However, the institutions responsible to push the agenda of equality forward do not function with accountability, transparency and sincerity. Law enforcers succumb to pressure from powerful people and allow perpetrators to go free. The rape and murder of Tonu, a college student in Comilla is one such example. Women continue to face obstacles when seeking justice. From local shalish to all the way up, the system is mired in corruption and not women friendly causing humiliation and misery to women and their families when they go to exercise their fundamental right of seeking justice.

Lack of safety and security in the lives of women creates obstacles to the mobility of women forcing them to stay away from public participation, work and even education after a certain age. It poses a threat to the achievements of the SDG goals which targets achieving full gender parity in all social indicators by the year 2030. Lack of safety is not confined to public places, but also exists at home with prevalence of domestic violence being high, as per the BBS report of 2015.

The most important factor is the attitude of society and families towards women. The perception about women needs to undergo a change, from the present negative to a positive one. Women should be recognised and valued for their contribution, no matter what they do. Society and families have to understand that women make crucial contribution as home-makers through their productive and reproductive work or as workers in the fields, factories and offices. Their contribution should be evaluated, recognised and honoured. Violence and discrimination are symptoms, the real issue is respect, dignity and status. Unless women are accorded equal status, discrimination and violence against them will not be reduced.

Finally, the theme for International Women's Day this year is "economic empowerment of women in the changing world of work: Planet 50-50 by 2030." Indeed, it is time to recognise that the world of work for women has changed. Planet 50-50 by 2030 will only be possible when the world is willing to recognise and value women's work in all its dimension, both paid and unpaid. The campaign call is "Be bold for Change", calling to help forge a better working world for women, a more inclusive gender equal world.

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LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

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Never-ending traffic woes

Traffic congestion on city roads is increasing day by day with no solution in sight. There must be some way out. Officials of the road traffic department and traffic experts should sit down together to find out ways and means to fight this menace on the road. Lives of daily commuters have become miserable with so much of valuable time being wasted on the road every day.

The traffic signal system in the city has apparently completely broken down though; it needs to be urgently repaired and restored. Traffic police should be adequately trained and stationed in all important road junctions and crossings, especially during rush hours. Traffic rules should be strictly implemented and stiff fines should be handed to errant drivers, especially bus drivers who drop and pick up passengers wherever they like according to their whim, in complete violation of traffic rules.

Random checking of drivers' licenses, imposition of stiff fines to errant drivers, mandating use of overhead foot over-bridges, and use of the zebra crossing by pedestrians are some of the basic measures which can go a long way in improving the current situation.

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