



PHOTO: MD MOAZZEM MOSTAKIM

"Let me, O let me bathe my soul in colours;
let me swallow the sunset and drink the rainbow."
— Kahlil Gibran, author

SNAPSHOT

MAILBOX

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PHOTO: PAHN CHAKMA

The Plight of the Indigenous People

During my time at university, one of my friends, from an indigenous community, and I used to share a dorm room. He was very well-mannered and I spent a lot of time with him, always curious to learn about his culture. He told me many stories about their tough life in the hill tracts. He used to sing indigenous songs in which I could only recognise the word 'Rangamati', which was once their capital districts before the construction of the Kaptai hydro-electric facility that engulfed a large part of the district. Seeing the snapshot of Rangamati Kaptai Lake by Pahn Chakma, published in Star Weekend Magazine on 10th March 2017, I was reminded of my friend and the songs he used to sing in honour of their glorious past. The Kaptai Lake may look tranquil, but the lives of the indigenous people are not. However, I would like to thank Pahn Chakma for this outstanding photo which took me back to the older days when I used to listen to the untold stories of the indigenous people and dreamed of rescuing them from their hardships.

Md Azam Khan
Laxmipur, Chittagong

Do You Recognise the Patriarchy?

I was grieving when I was reading the article titled 'Do you recognise the patriarchy' in the Star Weekend's issue of March 03, 2017. However, after reading this article, I felt like it is the reflection of my life, it is my own story that has been told in this article. It is the story of all the women of the world who have to constantly fight with the patriarchal system, till the very end of their lives. On the other hand, I also enjoyed the article because, through this article, the writer has effectively questioned the patriarchal construct of our society with a very strong and satirical tone.

Nasrin Akther
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PHOTO COURTESY: TRAUMALINK

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

GENDER

Recently, the news of a Dhaka University (DU) teacher's suspension – following claims from some of his Masters students that he showed "obscene materials" in his Gender and Development class – made the rounds on social media. The DU authorities temporarily suspended Development Studies Professor Dr Md Reazul Haque over the allegation. The slides that stirred this debate depict illustrations and pictures which critique gender-insensitive behaviour and public policies.

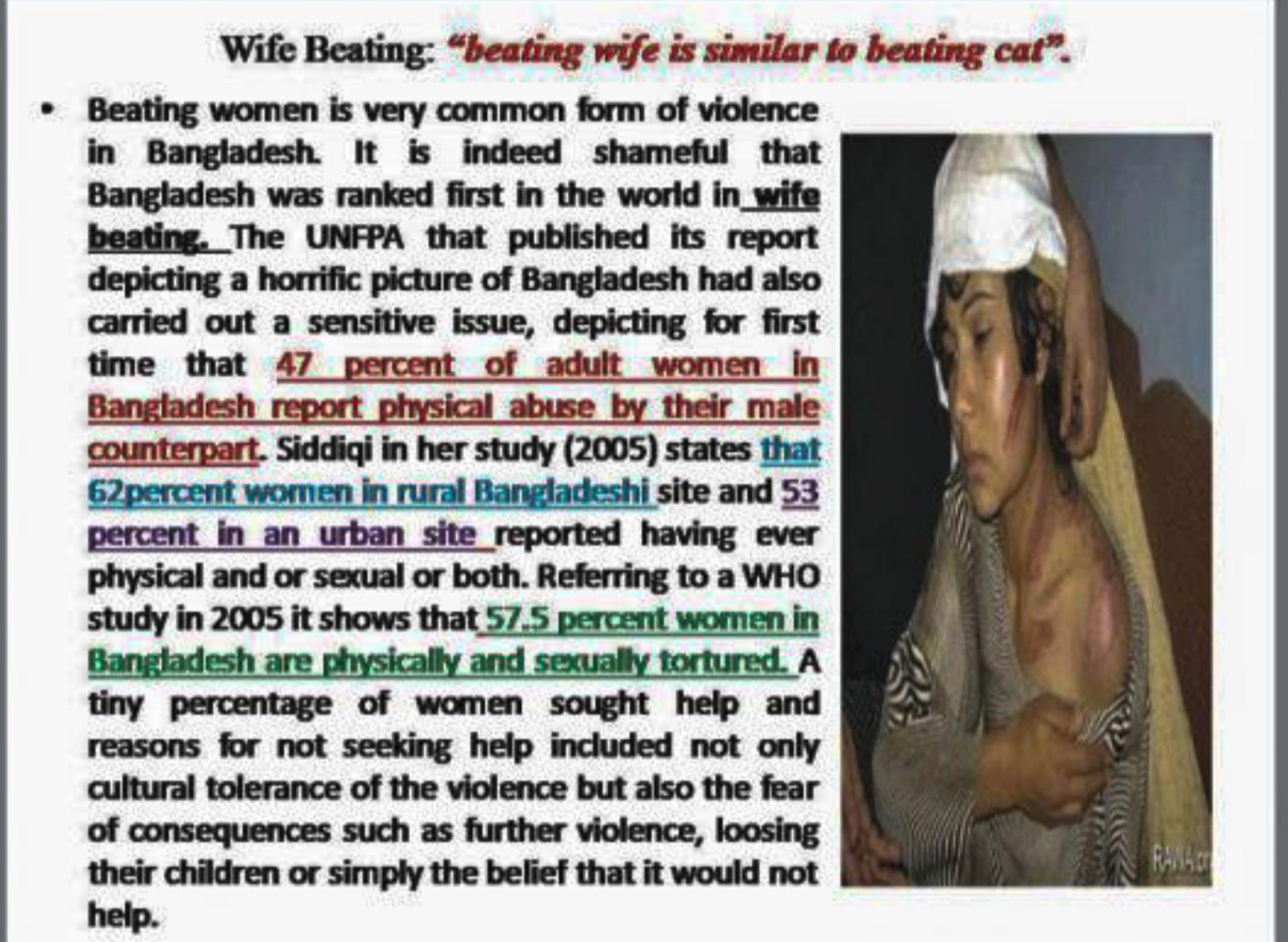
This incident naturally raised important questions: What exactly was the objectionable content of the course? How do we even define obscenity in study materials, particularly in disciplines like Gender and Development Studies?

The allegation that the materials taught in Dr Haque's class were "obscene" reveals a deep-rooted anxiety and discomfort to discuss issues related to gender and sexuality. Sexuality, since long, has been deemed as something to be discussed in hushed voices, behind closed doors – something too inappropriate, to

Dr Haque shares his confusion regarding his students' reactions. "Many women are physically and sexually harassed at home – sure, we all know that. But when I show pictures that show bruises on the exposed parts of the female body – that suddenly becomes obscenity?" questions Dr Haque. "If I talk about rape culture or body politics of the Hijra community in modern Asia in my classroom, how can it be considered

WHO DEFINES OBSCENITY?

FAYEKA ZABEEN SIDDIUQA

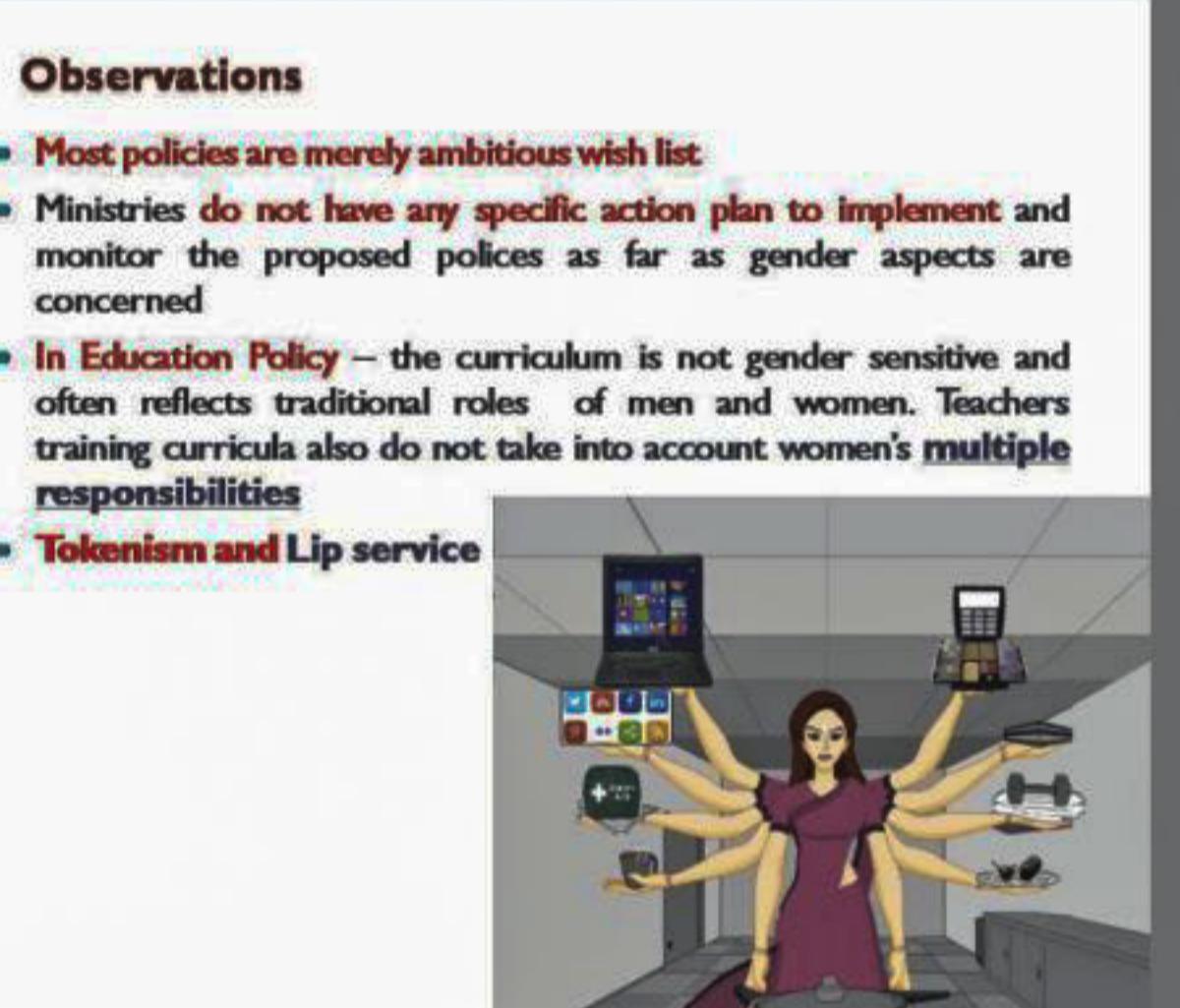


Wife Beating: "beating wife is similar to beating cat".

• Beating women is very common form of violence in Bangladesh. It is indeed shameful that Bangladesh was ranked first in the world in wife beating. The UNFPA that published its report depicting a horrific picture of Bangladesh had also carried out a sensitive issue, depicting for first time that 47 percent of adult women in Bangladesh report physical abuse by their male counterpart. Siddiqui in her study (2005) states that 62 percent women in rural Bangladeshi site and 53 percent in an urban site reported having ever physical or sexual or both. Referring to a WHO study in 2005 it shows that 57.5 percent women in Bangladesh are physically and sexually tortured. A tiny percentage of women sought help and reasons for not seeking help included not only cultural tolerance of the violence but also the fear of consequences such as further violence, losing their children or simply the belief that it would not help.

Observations

- Most policies are merely ambitious wish list
- Ministries do not have any specific action plan to implement and monitor the proposed policies as far as gender aspects are concerned
- In Education Policy – the curriculum is not gender sensitive and often reflects traditional roles of men and women. Teachers training curricula also do not take into account women's multiple responsibilities
- Tokenism and Lip service



The Body Politics: Prostitution, Sexuality and the Law in Bangladesh



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Slides taken from Dr Reazul Haque's presentation.

time to place gender at the centre of our education agenda."

Labelling course content as "obscene" and "vulgar" will hinder the creation of an inclusive environment in the classrooms and discourage free thinking, believes Dr Halim. "After Dr Haque's incident, other faculty teaching similar subjects will be in a persistent fear of being watched and judged for what they teach in the classrooms," she adds.

Unfortunately, starting from a young age in school we are taught to shy away from topics that society considers to be "sensitive" and "controversial" no matter how important they may be. Thus, our natural reaction is to be "offended" when we are confronted with such issues. It is common for teachers to approach sexuality and reproductive health from a superficial standpoint, without recognising the importance of conducting discussions with students in a professional and educational manner. Incidents like the suspension of the university teacher will thereby surely further weaken the confidence of facilitators to talk about these issues that are crucial to understanding society, people and our identities. ■

be discussed openly in a class. Even if it's in a room full of adults who should be able to confront these issues in a critical and constructive manner.

"Teaching gender and development studies will inevitably require the instructors to bring up 'sensitive' topics, ranging from sexual orientation to transgender movements, from the history of sexual norms to queer theory and gender identity and gender biases," says Dr Sadeka Halim, Professor, Department of Sociology, Dhaka University, and former information commissioner. "The more I teach gender studies in classrooms, the more I realise that there is still a tremendous amount of taboo around sexuality and the female body."

What surprised Dr Haque is that that none of the 15 students raised any objections during the classes about the audiovisuals and overall course material. In fact, throughout his career, while teaching subjects like gender and development, social inclusion or feminist research methodologies, he was required to bring up issues that we generally don't talk about in public. In 2015, he published his book, *Voices from the Edge: Justice, Agency and the Plight of Floating Sex Workers in Dhaka, Bangladesh*, which was applauded by gender experts in the country.

vulgar? If my fellow professor from Population Science chooses his PhD thesis on 'Homosexuality, HIV and Stigma', would we consider that to be inappropriate and obscene as well?"

If we consider these issues "obscene", public discussions on issues like sexuality, rape, and reproductive health will continue to be vague and deceptive. And what constitutes obscene, anyway, and according to whom? As Mahmudul H Sumon, Associate Professor, Department of Anthropology, Jahangirnagar University, argues, "The question of obscenity is a

