

Lessons from Aduri's ordeal



NO STRINGS ATTACHED
AASHA MEHREEN AMIN

TUESDAY'S verdict by a special court in Dhaka, which sentenced Nawrin Jahan Nodi to life imprisonment for torturing an 11-year-old domestic help, Aduri, and dumping her into a dustbin assuming she was dead, should give us immense satisfaction. This is because while we often get the news of the abuse of child domestic workers from the media, it is rare to hear about the abuser being punished, let alone given a harsh reprimand by the court. And we know why this is so. The social status of the abuser, usually the employer or a relative of the employer, provides a certain kind of immunity against legal action being taken. Human rights lawyers have often expressed their frustration at the inevitable out-of-court settlements that the victim's family agrees to – out of fear of repercussions and because they do not believe they will actually get justice. Parents send their children to work in houses because they cannot afford to feed them. They also think that their children will live in a safe, respectable environment. Until their children are left broken by their employers.

This time, however, the persistent efforts of BNWLA (Bangladesh National Women Lawyers

Association), a human rights and legal aid organisation, as well as the extensive coverage of the electronic and print media, have paid off, and resulted in justice. The 2013 images of the emaciated Aduri, her eyes vacant and her face and body displaying the gruesome wounds left by her employer, evoked shock and disgust among people. But sadly, until Tuesday, most of us had forgotten about Aduri and her nightmare ordeal. Because there have been so many other cases after Aduri, of children working in households being subject to the worst kinds of physical torture. And in most of these cases, after the initial sensation and created by the horrific details and images, the news died down and everybody forgot about that child who will never forget the nightmare of being at the mercy of a sadistic stranger. The news of this groundbreaking verdict has reminded us once again of the extent of cruelly human beings are capable of.

The details of Aduri's case are sickening. It indicates a systematic torture of a child by a monster in the guise of a middle-class housewife. Eleven-year-old Aduri was allowed only one meal a day – at night, some puffed rice or rice with salt – and beat. But being practically starved was a mild form of abuse compared to what Nawrin Jahan Nodi did to this child. According to Aduri, Nawrin would torture her on a regular basis. She would cut Aduri's face, scalp and



parts of her body with a blade, burn her with a hot iron or heated spatula, beat her with sticks and so on. One day, when it seemed Aduri had succumbed to her wounds, Nawrin

dumped her in a dustbin – the ultimate manifestation of her contempt for a child whose only crime was that she was poor, helpless and had no way of escaping. Even

after four years in her mother's care, the child is visibly traumatised. She is no longer emaciated but her face has the deep marks of the barbarity she has experienced. She still has nightmares in which Nawrin continues to torture her.

It is shocking when we read news of such savagery or watch it on television. But why are we so surprised? Have we not heard of people beating up their child domestic worker? It has happened among our relatives, in our innermost circles – even within our own households. We may not be direct abusers but in many cases we are silent spectators, not wanting to disrupt the status quo or be at odds with people from our own social status. The fact that Aduri had to be dumped half dead into a dustbin for the nation to know about her ordeal and then for the court to sentence her torturer, is ample proof of the implicit complicity within privileged classes that overlooks abuses committed by one of their own. The victims, after all, are just domestic workers, they are from the voiceless, powerless, representation-less section of society. They are dispensable and of no consequence.

If this is not how it is, then why didn't anyone stop this monster? What was her husband, her mother doing when it was obvious that the child had been abused? Were they active participants or silent bystanders? Did no one, not a single

neighbour, hear the shrill cries or mournful groans of that little child as she lay writhing in pain in the veranda where she slept?

These are uncomfortable questions but ones that we must answer. As a society we are all part of this shame – the government for not banning child domestic labour which, by definition, should fall under hazardous work, the legal system that has too many loopholes for abusers to go scot-free, individuals who think nothing of making a child do awkward work and depriving him of school, absence of laws to specifically protect child domestic workers' rights and all those of us who do absolutely nothing when a child worker gets hit, cursed or treated with utter disrespect and negligence. We can no longer feel good about ourselves by saying we are not like Nawrin or any of those other members of so called "respectable society" who have displayed their basest instincts and got caught.

Yes, we are reassured by the verdict that has given justice to this brave child. But this is just one case. Children, especially from marginalised groups, are vulnerable to all kinds of abuse in our society, and when they are confined to households as domestic help, they are doubly vulnerable. If we cannot reverse this frightening reality we will have failed as members of the human race.

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EFADUL HUIQ

THE Daily Star recently reported that at least 20 utilities "syndicates" are operating in Korail slum. The local police and several government bodies are also involved in the distribution scheme. For those not familiar with Dhaka's informal settlements, the details are alarming. The syndicates are associations of local residents who take on roles such as "linemen, rent collector, and managers," providing utilities in negotiated turf areas. Police officers and government utility employees take bribes to help establish and run the "unauthorised services."

These local utility associations provide at least 10,000 gas connections and 15,000 water and electricity connections to people living in Korail while making around Tk 15 crore per month, much of which goes into bribing government officials. Given the turf-based, operational scheme, the slum occasionally experiences violent turf wars among the syndicates. The government officials interviewed referred to the utilities connections as dangerous, and one official went on to say that "he had lost count of how many times they have snapped illegal gas connections at Korail." All in all, Korail slum appears to be a territorial marketplace beyond the regulatory control of the government.

In public opinion, slums are often perceived as sites for hijacking, smuggling, drug dealing and other antisocial activities. The report on informal utilities providers seems to strengthen that perception and justify the eviction of Korail residents as an anti-crime measure. As the government moves forward with a plan for a high-tech park development in Korail, the fear of displacement, either by fire or force, looms large in the minds of the slum residents. To avoid lending credibility to the criminalisation of slum inhabitants and rationalising evictions, even as we face the facts, we must step back and pay closer attention to Korail's context.

Korail slum is home to at least 100,000 citizens who work in diverse

sectors in the city. Without getting into the complicated push-and-pull factors that bring more than 70 people per hour to Dhaka, and the vulnerabilities of a slum life, we can say that the residents of Korail slum are facing a chain of social and economic precariousness. According to a 2014 government census, the majority of Dhaka's slum residents are garment workers, rickshaw pullers, domestic helps, construction and transportation workers, small business owners and service sector employees, students and housewives. It is noteworthy that the survey does not mention any slum residents engaged in criminal activities as their occupation. The slum problem is similar in case of Korail. In other words, Korail residents constitute a significant section of the urban workforce that runs the city.

Understandably, when thousands of people live in a place, they are going to need gas, water, and electricity, and as citizens, they have the right to access these utilities. Since the responsible government bodies don't provide sufficient connections, private associations arrange for the required utility infrastructure and the residents become dependent on unauthorised and unsafe utility grids. This is not just a story of "syndicates" operating and making huge profits out of informal utilities in Korail. Nor is it a story of turf wars resulting in violence. This was a story of organised associations without the know-how and resources for safety, making basic utilities accessible to thousands of citizens. This is also a story of how Korail inhabitants have to pay exorbitant amounts to access the basic elements of urban life, making their per square foot housing cost more than the housing cost in affluent neighbourhoods.

If formal utilities connections were made available to slum residents, they wouldn't have need for illegal connections to meet their needs, particularly as informal utilities require bribing government officials, involve hazardous and unreliable connections, and result in violence that disrupts the social fabric of slum residents, who have a rightful claim to public resources. The absence of an

institutional response to realise their rights compels them to depend on "illegal" activities to meet their basic needs. The problem then is not that there are "illegal connections" in Korail but that the relevant government bodies—WASA, DESCO, and Titas Gas—don't provide utilities connections in formal connections. The number of legal utilities connections jumped manifold in a year.

In fact, research exists specifically about the electricity access in Korail

slum citizens would be able to make their recommendation a reality. To the proposal for community-centred utilities and housing planning in Korail slum, we might add the urgency to explore the potential for providing sustainable utilities. While countries like China, Japan, India, and Germany are shifting to renewable energy, Bangladesh is aggressively pursuing a fossil fuel-based energy policy as



There may be colourful possibilities under grey appearances. Korail slum doesn't present government authorities with a challenge to get rid of criminal activities but rather to help citizens of this city access affordable, reliable, and sustainable utilities.

PHOTO: MUNIR UZ ZAMAN/APP

receiving accessible, reliable, and affordable public utilities.

The Daily Star article reported that the authorities carry out drives against illegal connections instead of providing utilities for all Korail residents. It is surprising that utility officials have seen no result in snapping connections. Global experience with informal utilities connections shows that snapping connections doesn't impact the operations of informal utility associations. Take, for instance, the case of Kenya Power and Lighting Corporation and its project in some of the largest slums in the world. Their project started in Kibera, Nairobi, and early in their work, Kenya Power was taking down unauthorised connections. The

slum. In a 2014 study, those researchers found that the illegal status of Korail slum is a major barrier to electricity access. In their detailed list of recommendations, they identified giving Korail slum "the authorisation of a permanent status" as a first step. An on-site rehabilitation project, developed and implemented through community participation, for Korail

seen, for example in the case of Rampal Power Plant near the Sundarbans, a UNESCO world heritage and ecologically sensitive site. According to energy finance analysts Buckley and Nicholas, Bangladesh's current energy policy trajectory is environmentally and financially unsound in the global context. An energy policy that damages the

environment also impacts the health and livelihood of vulnerable populations in numerous ways. So it is expected that providing formal utilities to the slum residents will contribute to a transition to renewable energy through community-controlled development projects. Establishing a local infrastructure of renewable energy resources would be a step in the direction of green economy in Bangladesh, and such a project would lower household energy cost in the long run while creating jobs for the community members.

During this year's G20 summit, "Zombie" protesters took to streets in Hamburg. Covered in clay, the performance artists staggered and crawled along until one of them rubbed his eyes, unbuttoned his dusty gray shirt revealing the colour inside, and "came alive." He then went around waking up other zombies. The awakened performers got rid of their dusty gray attire and danced together. Similarly, making our way through Dhaka city every day, it is possible that we also stagger through the streets – past the slums, through the traffic congestions, past the filled-up water bodies. It is possible that in many cases, we undergo a feeling of catastrophe after catastrophe.

Just as we reach this point, we could recall the G20 zombie performance as a reminder that there may be colourful possibilities under grey appearances, that there may be another Dhaka underneath the Dhaka we inhabit. Korail slum doesn't present the authorities with a challenge to get rid of criminal activities but we need to recognise the right of the residents to access affordable, reliable, and sustainable utilities.

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A WORD A DAY

ACROSS

6 Storybook in the air

11 Rocker David

12 Kept in reserve

13 Boat's back

14 "Blowing in the Wind" singer

15 Nervous

17 Illuminated

18 Parades

22 Crooner Perry

23 Followed

27 Set off

29 Treasure stash

30 Fiddle (with)

32 Early garden

33 Mimics Porky Pig

35 Nile serpent

CROSSWORD BY THOMAS JOSEPH

38 Listen to

39 Egg part

41 Rudimentary

45 Moon-based

46 Veridical

47 Flag features

48 Film trophy

24 One source

25 Eternally

19 Punch targets

2 Auction buy

3 Have debts

44 Independence Day

5 Watches over

6 Gyp patron's

7 Some amount of

8 Duck feature

9 Superfruit berry

10 Monthly bill

16 Obtained

18 Jazz style

19 Rain dance tribe

20 Yemen neighbor

21 Dangerous buildings

24 One source

25 Eternally

26 Bears' tails

28 Ties down

31 Forget

34 Rebound

35 Proscribing

36 Close

37 --coloda

40 Black-gow

42 Min. part

43 Nest egg choice

44 Sedan or SUV



YESTERDAY'S ANSWER

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PARTY

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MANNA NEVER

PLEAD SEEDS

PARAPHERNALIA
noun
miscellaneous articles, especially the equipment needed for a particular activity