

On sexism, son preference and female infanticide in Bangladesh



TAQBIR HUDA

On July 30, a father in Narayanganj burned his nine-month-old female infant alive since he "wanted a son" and was enraged at the birth of a girl ("Father 'wanted son', burns baby girl alive", *The Daily Star*, August 4, 2017). He poured petrol over the child when she was asleep and set her on fire. He then switched on the fan to let the fire spread and stopped the mother from helping the child or taking her to the hospital reported a leading online news site.

While it is appalling and abominable that a practice as medieval and barbaric as female infanticide still takes place in our country, it should not come as a surprise. In fact a similar incident took place only two months ago when a man from Satkhira, Khulna threw his two-week-old daughter into the pond since he too wanted a son and was disgusted by the birth of a daughter ("Father kills 15-day-old infant for being female", *Dhaka Tribune*, June 9, 2017). Last year, a man from Abhayrang, Jessore poured poison into his three-month-old daughter's mouth while she was asleep because he was craving the birth of a son and could not bear having a daughter for the fourth time ("Father kills daughter", *The Independent*, March 2, 2016).

Killing new born daughters (i.e. female infanticide) is not a random, inexplicable act of violence; it is an extreme manifestation of a pre-existing and deeply sexist societal mindset known as "son preference" which still plagues a sizeable portion of our population today. A 2006 study of 850 families conducted by Promoting Human Rights Education in Bangladesh showed that 93 percent of Bangladeshi families preferred a son, viewing them as a "blessing" to the home and country, while 93 percent viewed girls as a "problem." ("Son Preference", Stop Violence Against Women, The Advocates for Human Rights). So it is not enough or even helpful to simply admonish the perpetrator (necessary as that may be), we must also look at the wider scheme of things and force an introspection: what socioeconomic factors cause certain

people to cherish the birth of a son but loathe the birth of a daughter—sometimes loathe to the extent of killing their own flesh and blood—and what are we, as a country, doing to tackle this insidious mentality and its component causes?

In South Asian culture the birth of a son is celebrated because boys are seen as custodians of the family who will secure the family's future by providing economic security and ensuring the continuity of the male line. Conversely, the birth of a daughter is an impediment to this continuity since our culture dictates that upon marriage a girl must take up her husband's name,

seen as a sound investment. This mindset is encapsulated in the old and notorious Asian expression which warns: "educating a daughter is like watering another man's garden". Rather paradoxically, it is our own sexist and cultural practices which deny a girl the same opportunities as a boy which in turn eternalises her financial dependence on male kin but the girl is then blamed for "being a burden" as though it was of her own doing. How can we feasibly assess a girl's worth when we do not even allow her to realise her full potential to begin with?

In her book *Gender Roles: A Sociological Perspective*, Linda Lindsey explains how female infanticide and

and is theorised to be caused by sex-selective abortions, female infanticide. According to a study by the University of Kent, there are approximately 2.7 million missing women in Bangladesh ("Missing Women and Bare Branches: Gender Balance and Conflict", ESCP Report, Issue 11). The study also found that gender imbalance in Asia is primarily the result of son preference and the profound devaluation of female life. The futility of the Dowry Prohibition Act in curbing the practice of dowry illustrates how legal change alone cannot remedy cultural malpractices; societal change must also follow.

Why must we wait till a female child



New platform for factory inspection

We should rectify our own problems

THE BGMEA has proposed formation of a local agency that will operate along the same lines as Accord and Alliance which will run under an ombudsman chosen by the Prime Minister's Office. From the information made available we understand that the representatives of the readymade garments industry intend to sit with the government after Eid to give shape to this body, which in effect will do factory inspections and recommend remedial measures.

Our question to the industry leaders is that why it had to take a major disaster like Rana Plaza and the subsequent formation of international brand-led initiatives like Accord and Alliance to conduct these safety measures on our industries? Why these concerns could not be addressed by the industry as a safety measure that protects both the country's image and workers' welfare.

The new platform looks very good on paper, but with the government providing technical taskforces for handling fire, electrical and safety engineers, it would be premature to comment on its efficacy at this stage. The proposal is a good one, but its implementation will take some time to get all proposed stakeholders, including trade unions and the brands, on board. We ought to be proactive in creating a sense of confidence among foreign buyers in addressing our systemic faults and not act under pressure. Hence, it is imperative that the trade bodies, representing the garments industry, i.e. BGMEA and BKMEA take it upon themselves to take ownership of the industry problems and sort out the very real concerns of safety.

Dhaka roads are a mess!

Is repair even a priority?

THROUGH the length and breadth of Dhaka city, the conditions of roads both major and minor are in a state of disrepair. The incessant rainfall of the past few weeks coupled with the uncoordinated development works carried out by different utility companies like RAJUK and WASA have made life miserable for its residents. Potholes and water logging seem to have become permanent features in some of the busiest roads at some of the most traffic congested areas of Dhaka including Gabtoli, Moghbazar, Malibagh, Badda, Jatrabari and Lalbagh. Indeed, local residents in these areas regularly have to wade through ankle or knee deep water which is often mixed with garbage that overflows from blocked sewerage.

We find it totally unconscionable that authorities seem to have turned a blind eye to the horrendous conditions people must put up with—not just during rainy season when the situation gets amplified with water thrown into the mixture of bad experiences. Residents complain of long tailbacks and frequent overturning of non-motorised passenger carrying vehicles. Accidents are bound to happen and commuters are subject to wasted hours sitting in traffic that is unhelpful for commerce and industry too.

We are barely two weeks away from Eid-ul-Azha which will involve some 7 to 8 million people leaving the city for holidays. Our question to authorities is this: are we going to go for those cosmetic touch ups to roads and declare them fit for movement of heavy vehicles like buses? And what happens when the festivities are over? Is it back to business as usual for Dhaka residents who must contend with such chaos on a daily basis? Human suffering and loss of human lives appear to be no longer a concern for city authorities and that seems to be the fate of all those who call Dhaka their home.

PROJECT SYNDICATE

The wrong way to prevent nuclear war



CARL BILDT

A vast majority of countries want to eliminate the existential threat of nuclear catastrophe, and rightly so. But achieving a world free of nuclear weapons is easier said than done, and there is a risk that some attempts to do so could prove self-defeating.

Since the end of the Cold War, nuclear stockpiles around the world have been significantly reduced. Russia and the United States have each shrunk their nuclear arsenals by 80 percent, and during Barack Obama's presidency, the US urged Russia to pursue further reductions. In Western Europe, the United Kingdom and France have both made their already small arsenals even smaller.

These countries had various reasons for reducing their stockpiles. But, as signatories to the 1968 Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT)—the foundation of global efforts to reduce the threat posed by nuclear weapons—they also had an obligation to do so.

In recent years, progress toward nuclear disarmament has stalled. Russia is currently modernising its strategic nuclear forces, and has started to mention its nuclear capacity more often in public statements. That explains why efforts to reduce nuclear arsenals in Western Europe have come to a halt. The US, for its part, is also reviewing its options for modernising its nuclear arsenal.

Meanwhile, Pakistan has continued to produce the fissile materials used in nuclear weapons. Efforts to make the Middle East a nuclear-free zone have gone nowhere, largely because of Israel. The international community could not agree on a way forward at NPT review conferences in 2005 and 2015. And, of course, North Korea's nuclear ambitions have created another nuclear crisis in East Asia.

Against this backdrop, a large bloc of countries has proposed a far-reaching Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons, a draft of which was endorsed by 122 United Nations member states in early July. Unfortunately, what started as a

worthwhile humanitarian effort has culminated in a severely flawed proposal.

Three issues stand out. First, since no nuclear states support a nuclear-ban treaty, the current proposal, by itself, would not rid the world of a single nuclear warhead. Worse, the new treaty could undermine the NPT, which, despite its own flaws, has far wider backing, including that of the five permanent members of the UN Security Council (China, France, Russia, the UK, and the US). Finally, by treating the concept of extended nuclear deterrence as illegal, or at least immoral, the draft treaty could actually threaten security in Europe and East Asia.

The initial draft treaty, when it was unveiled earlier this year, did not include language explicitly banning the use of nuclear weapons as a deterrent. But the version that countries voted on in July did. This is a critical change. The threat of a nuclear counterstrike is what keeps countries from using nuclear weapons in the first place. And so-called extended deterrence through alliances is

nuclear deterrence from the US.

Without such protection, Japan would be completely vulnerable to Chinese nuclear blackmail and North Korean missile attacks. Indeed, since diplomacy and deep sanctions have not put an end to North Korea's nuclear program, nuclear deterrence stands as the only practical way to protect East Asian countries from nuclear blackmail or attack. Likewise, the vast majority of European countries—from Finland to Portugal—have no wish to reside in the shadow of Russian nuclear warheads with nothing to protect them.

By effectively banning deterrence, the draft treaty could make the world even less safe than it already is. Of course, proponents of the treaty argue that it would build up public support for a nuclear-weapons ban over time, eventually forcing the governments of nuclear states to give up their arsenals.

But this is pure *naïveté*. No one with any connection to reality could seriously believe that the governments of China, Israel, Pakistan, and Russia will simply

reductions in both the US and Russia, where serious risks still need to be addressed. To that end, it is vital that neither country modernises its nuclear arsenal in a way that is seen as expanding its nuclear capabilities. Instead, they must pave the way for further reductions.

In the Middle East, ending current conflicts and developing conflict-resolution mechanisms could help drive progress toward nuclear-free status over time. In this regard, the nuclear agreement between Iran and the P5+1

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Still from Stanley Kubrick's *Dr. Strangelove or: How I Learned to Stop Worrying and Love the Bomb*.

what protects non-nuclear states from being blackmailed by nuclear states. Without extended deterrence, non-nuclear countries could see fit to acquire nuclear weapons of their own.

It is for this reason that the Netherlands, the only NATO country to participate in developing the nuclear-ban treaty, ultimately voted against it. Japan, the only country that has ever been attacked with nuclear weapons, has also withheld support for the treaty, because it relies on extended

abandon their nuclear weapons because public opinion has turned against them.

Unfortunately, nuclear weapons are broadly popular in these countries, because they are seen as a security guarantor and a realization of national ambitions on the world stage. Those of us who want a nuclear-free world do not have to agree with this outlook; but we had better not ignore it.

A more realistic approach would be to pursue further nuclear-weapons

(the five permanent members of the UN Security Council, plus Germany) is an important first step.

As for South Asia, one hopes that a *détente* between India and Pakistan will facilitate better nuclear-arms control, even if the shadow of China—which sees its bomb as part of its place in the world—will still hang over India.

In the end, full-scale nuclear disarmament probably cannot be achieved with a single Big Bang. The world would be better served by an incremental approach based on the NPT, strategic arms reductions by the major powers, and conflict resolution in key regions.

In the best-case scenario, the proposed nuclear-ban treaty will be just a sideshow. But there is reason to fear that it will complicate ongoing efforts to reduce nuclear arsenals further, deepen the divide between nuclear- and non-nuclear states, and, in the worst-case scenario, even increase the risk of a nuclear conflict in key regions.

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LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

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Save Dhaka city from sound pollution

The Daily Star has recently reported that DMP destroyed around 10,000 hydraulic horns in the capital in a bid to curb noise pollution. It's a welcome step.

The sound level in Dhaka city is nearly two times higher than the standard level, according to a survey conducted by Poribesh Banchoo Andolon. Loud noise may cause hearing loss for old people and infants, and also serious psychological and physiological problems such as heart diseases and neurological disorders.

The relevant authorities should take stringent measures against sound pollution and penalise the people and organisations responsible for the menace in the interest of public health. I would like to draw the attention of the concerned authorities to look into this issue immediately.
 Zubair Khaled Huq, *By email*

Increase stipend amount for meritorious students

The government of Bangladesh has been providing a stipend to students who pass public examinations meritoriously. In recent years, the number of stipend against PSC and JSC examinations has increased as the number of students increased many folds.

The stipend amount, however, is very small. To make it meaningful, the value of the scholarship should be increased at least four times. In our country, the government spends very little on education than many other nations. Government spending on education is regarded as an investment all over the world. So the suggested increase of the stipend amount should not be seen as a burden.
 Md Ashraf Hossain, *Ramna*