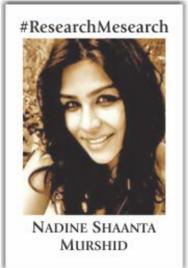


Reproductive coercion or business as usual?



#ResearchResearch
NADINE SHAANTA MURSHID

MALEKA (not her real name) found herself in a whirlwind relationship in which she felt she has no control. She got pregnant because she couldn't negotiate condom use with her partner and then her partner blamed her for it, even though they both had a role in it. Obviously, her pregnancy was questioned, she was accused of getting pregnant to serve her own needs, and then left alone to fend for herself under the pretext of a misunderstanding. He did not respond to her calls for help when she needed him. She dealt with the emotional trauma of a pregnancy she had to terminate by herself, feeling that the pregnancy or its termination should not have been her burden to bear alone.

Saleka (also not her real name) is pregnant for the fifth time. Inheritances notwithstanding, she works, as does her husband—which means they are of means. They can afford to have five children, send them to day care and private school, maintain an education fund in each of their children's names. But, she looks tired all the time. When asked about it, she sighs and says she's happy, more to herself than to anyone else, I feel. She posts happy photos on social media, but she no longer has time to hide the dark circles under the eyes. They've become permanent fixtures on her face. There was a time when she used to care about those things; she no longer does. She had once said, *he wants more children*. Just once. But that was enough.

A 10-year-old rape victim in India was disallowed from having an abortion by India's Supreme Court. She had the baby on August 28. She was not told about her pregnancy. Unbeknownst to her, a C-section was performed to birth the child.

The stories of Saleka, Maleka, and the 10-year-old girl lie on the spectrum of reproductive coercion by intimate partners, social norms, expectations, and the State. In the case of Saleka, the coercion was, and still is, more subtle, perhaps emotionally manipulative; even though, she would never even call it coercion. In the case of the 10-year-old, the coercion was public, authoritative, final, and importantly, hidden

from her. In the case of Maleka, the coercion (to undergo menstrual regulation) was part of a toxic, unhealthy relationship that she left after months and months of trying to fix it.

National data suggests that 80 percent of women in Bangladesh report being in unhealthy relationships in which they are abused by their husbands or intimate partners. We must realise, then, that it's just about everyone that is experiencing intimate partner violence (IPV). Or, that it's just about everyone who is inflicting violence on their partners. The literature on IPV shows that women who experience IPV are often subject to reproductive coercion, much like Maleka. Another body of research identifies that many women in abusive relationships often remain in them because they form unhealthy attachment and emotional dependency on their abusive partners, often by use of pull-push psychological tactics instigated by the abuser. Additionally, women are often cajoled into believing they can fix the relationships because "their" actions cause the turmoil in their relationships to begin with.

The good news, though, is that women who are in abusive relationships don't always lose control over their bodies, at least in Bangladesh. Maleka's story resonates with findings from a study Gretchen Ely and I conducted last year to find that women who experienced IPV were *more* likely to use contraceptives, perhaps to ensure that a child is not brought into the unhealthy mix.

That said, however, I must also say that Maleka is not representative of women who experience unwanted pregnancies in Bangladesh. Most women who get pregnant accidentally are unaware of the choices they have. When they find out that they are pregnant it is often too late for them to access legal abortion services, even if they do know about their choices. Finally, the myths that service providers bring to service delivery create misunderstandings and confusion about services that in turn result in uninformed decision-making.

Let me explain.

Abortion is illegal in Bangladesh unless the mother's life is at risk. All other concerns, including rape, are deemed unworthy of concern, which includes, obviously, the mental health ramifications of birthing your rapist's child.

Bangladesh has a caveat, like many other developing nations. Since 1979, Bangladesh's national family planning programme has allowed women to undergo a procedure called menstrual regulation (MR) up to 12 weeks after

a woman's last menstrual period. Menstrual regulation through medication (mifepristone and misoprostol) can be done up to 9 weeks after a woman's last menstrual period.

Despite the wide availability of MR services, surgical abortion rates in Bangladesh are fairly high, especially when compared to MR rates. In 2014, the annual rate of MR was 10 per 1,000 women aged between 15 and 49 years, while the abortion rate was 29 per 1,000 women in the same age group, for a total of 1,194,000 induced abortions in 2014

(Guttmacher Institute, 2014). Needless to say, most of these abortions were conducted in clandestine clinics by untrained professionals.

The question is why.

The Guttmacher Institute provides some answers:

- Most women do not know about MR.
- According to the most recent Demographic and Health Survey from Bangladesh, more than half of the women in the survey had not heard of MR.
- Three in 10 public or private facilities do

not have equipment, trained staff, or both, which has resulted in 105,000 women (27 percent of all women seeking MR) being refused MR services.

-Most facilities indicated that the primary reason for turning women away had to do with them being pregnant beyond the 12-week mark or other medical reasons. As in the case of the 10-year-old girl in India, legal abortion is impossible when the pregnancy is at a later stage.

-Facilities also cited social and cultural reasons for turning women away when they tried to access MR services. As indicated in a Guttmacher report, 27 percent were turned away "because they were childless," seven percent considered the women "too young," eight percent turned them away because they didn't have their husband's consent, and six percent for being unmarried.

Anecdotal evidence from my interviews with women about their reproductive health and contact with service providers suggest that indirect manipulation, including asking repeatedly if they were ready for an MR, asking if they were interested in knowing the gender of the fetus even though gender can only be determined after being pregnant for 10 weeks, invoking the father and issues of permission, scare tactics about risky future pregnancies, and other coercive tactics play a role in women changing their minds about undergoing MR. This highlights the role of providers in providing MR services, reminding us how little we know about what providers, particularly low-skilled technicians and nurses, know about procedures like MR, and how their perceptions impact the way in which they provide services to women seeking MR.

My sense of how MR is viewed in Bangladesh is that it is not stigmatised in the same way that abortion is in other parts of the world, such as the United States, and we should keep it that way.

However, the rise in the number of potentially clandestine (non-MR) abortions is alarming. The rise of the number of Salekas and Malekas and children who are raped is alarming. It speaks to a culture where women's bodies are readily expected to bear the brunt of relational and structural problems even when that puts their bodies in harm's way. It continues the legacy of placing patriarchal and ideological baggage on the shoulders of women.

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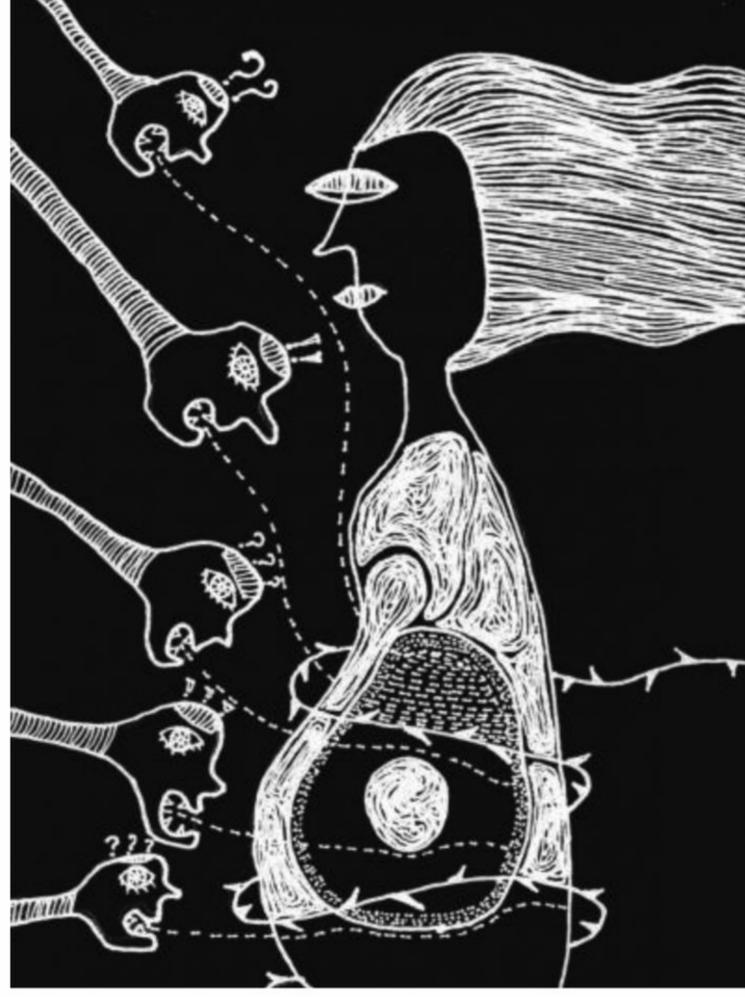


ILLUSTRATION: KAZI TAHISIN AGAZ APURBO

The world needs empowered women more than ever



VU THU HA

"WOMEN are the largest untapped reservoir of talent in the world," former US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton once said. Her words ring particularly true in Asia, where stereotypes and cultural norms continue to prevent millions of women from fulfilling their real potential.

Last week, representatives from 21 Asia-Pacific economies gathered for the APEC 2017 Women and the Economy Forum in Vietnam's ThuaThien-Hue Province, providing us with an opportunity to look more closely at the status-quo and some long-standing challenges to closing the gender gap.

First, some compelling figures. Despite the much-acclaimed economic and social progress of the past few decades, there are just two countries on this vast continent—the Philippines and Laos—that have made it to the top 50 of 144 countries ranked in the Global Gender Gap Report 2016.

It is no surprise, then, that an ILO report, "World Employment and Social Outlook: Trends for Women 2017", shows East and South Asia as the only two regions in the world seeing a reduction in the percentage of working women over the past decade. The situation is particularly worrisome in South Asia, where less than one-third of the female population are active in the labour market, 51 percentage points less than the rate for males.

The picture for the whole of Asia is not much brighter, according to the Asian Development Bank. Although most working-

age women in Asia wish to work, they are on average 70 percent less likely than men to take part in the labour force. The region as a whole loses an estimated USD 40 billion each year as a result of gender gaps in employment and education.

Even when women are able to find work, they are more likely than men to be vulnerably employed, with low wages and without social protection. In 2016, the percentage of women trapped in vulnerable employment was 78 percent in South and Southwest Asia and 60 percent in Southeast Asia.

As in most other regions in the world, the gender-based pay gap is another problem. According to ADB, a woman in Asia on average is paid 23 percent less than her male counterpart. An OECD report in 2015 found the situation was even worse in the regional economic powerhouses of South Korea and Japan—the two countries with the worst paid female employers among 35 OECD countries, with the difference being 36.6 percent and 26.6 percent respectively.

Several factors that have constrained

women from securing an equal footing with their male counterparts in the labour market, like gender discrimination, low education, burden of unpaid care work, and limited access to finance resources, were identified a long time ago.

The failure to remove these constraints is rooted in the entrenchment of social stereotypes and cultural norms in Asian countries, where male chauvinism is dominant and women are regarded as inferior.

In many Asian societies, including Vietnam, girls are still told that whoever they want to become, they should first be good at housework, and fulfill their role "by instinct" as a family caretaker. On the other hand, boys are groomed for "big" work and be the family's breadwinner.

Worse still, many women in these societies believe that males sharing the responsibility of housework signal their failure as a woman.

In Vietnam, we have a saying that is in complete harmony with the Confucian principle of women being completely subjugated to men in the family: "As a woman, what makes you stand higher than other women is your husband."

Many Vietnamese parents still don't believe that girls need to climb high up the education ladder, because the higher they study, the more difficult it would be to find a husband.

Gender stereotypes also limit career choices for women all over the world. Men are often associated with jobs deemed more important and requiring more skills, like scientists, astronauts, policemen or engineers, whereas women are considered more suitable for "softer" jobs like receptionists, secretaries and so on.

As a result, many women end up carrying a

huge burden of unpaid care work, downplaying their capability and not daring to dream big. They lose opportunities for higher education, quality jobs, and deeper social engagement. The perception of women's capability is also affected. An ADB study titled "Women in the workforce, an unmet potential in Asia and the Pacific", found that women were perceived to have lower working skills than men.

It is evident, then, that efforts to get more women into the mainstream economy should start with challenging and dismantling deeply ingrained stereotypes.

Concrete steps should be taken early, at home, in schools, and in communities so that boys learn to appreciate, even look up to women, and understand that care-giving and housework are natural tasks for both men and women. Girls should be taught to treasure themselves, to cherish and chase dreams bigger than traditional roles as wives and mothers.

These are fundamental changes that might take some time, but they are indispensable. Measures with immediate impact should be implemented as well. Greater investment in public services should lead to quality childcare and care for the elderly. Policies on parenting should boost men's role in childbirth and childcare, providing badly needed relief to over-burdened women.

Much has been said about the importance of public-private empowerment initiatives. The private sector can certainly play a major role in improving women's access to financial support, technology and business advice, given that a large proportion of micro, small and medium-sized enterprises in the Asia-Pacific region are led by women.

For example, in Vietnam, Facebook has recently partnered with governmental

agencies to launch a project supporting women entrepreneurs with investment, technology development, training and capacity building. This is a model that should be promoted.

Despite the obstacles, Asia does not lack role models of successful women in all fields and initiatives, especially those that effect far-reaching changes with positive national and international impacts. The legendary political figure that led the delegation of southern Communist forces at the Paris Peace Conference held to end the Vietnam War was a woman, Madam Nguyen ThiBinh. Japanese Professor Masayo Takahashi this year performed the world's first induced pluripotent stem cell-derived transplant into humans, revitalising hopes of a new way of treatment for diseased and damaged organs. Manasi Pradhan is leading a nationwide movement to end violence against Indian women.

In business, which was the focus of the APEC forum, Asia has some sterling role models too. Hong Kong's Zhou Qunfei is the richest self-made woman in the world, according to Forbes. Vietnamese Nguyen Thi Phuong Thao has become Southeast Asia's first self-made woman billionaire and one of the country's two billionaires.

Chinese business tycoon Jack Ma once said women were the "secret sauce" behind his company's success. We should recognise that they are the "secret sauce" for success of families around the world, and therefore, of all nations. And they should be given their dues, in the form of equality in the workplace, and equal access to opportunities to advance their lot.

Vu Thu Ha is Foreign Desk Editor, Viet Nam News. This is a series of columns on global affairs written by top editors and columnists from members of the Asia News Network and published in newspapers and websites across the region.



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QUOTABLE Quote

BRUCE LEE
HONG KONG ACTOR, FILM DIRECTOR AND MARTIAL ARTIST

The key to immortality is first living a life worth remembering.

CROSSWORD BY THOMAS JOSEPH

ACROSS

- 1 Small nail
- 5 Purse part
- 10 Solemn ceremony
- 11 Fall guy
- 12 Resting on
- 13 Horse-leading need
- 14 Souvenir for a star player
- 16 Junior, e.g.
- 20 Waste time
- 23 Genetic stuff
- 24 Stood
- 25 Less polite
- 27 Sea, to Simone
- 28 Mortarboard feature
- 29 What those in agreement are on

DOWN

- 1 Toot one's own horn
- 2 Comic Rudner
- 3 Physics bit
- 4 Relies
- 5 Hackneyed
- 6 Bridge costs
- 7 Turn bad
- 8 Candle count
- 9 According to
- 11 Humiliate

ACROSS

- 32 Defeated incumbent
- 36 Urban force
- 39 Detective's find
- 40 Held forth
- 41 Hand cost
- 42 Piper of rhyme
- 43 Rough voice

DOWN

- 15 Hay bundle
- 17 Says further
- 18 Patella's place
- 19 Countess's husband
- 20 Blocks up
- 21 Neighborhood
- 22 Bit of bait
- 25 Latest fad
- 26 Lot choice
- 28 Not ferul
- 30 Select group
- 31 Track horse
- 33 Radius partner
- 34 Divides the deck
- 35 Retain
- 36 Catchy music
- 37 Vein makeup
- 38 Back muscle, for short

BEETLE BAILEY
BY MORT WALKER

HEY! WHAT HAPPENED?
BLAME THE DOCTOR

THE DOCTOR TOLD ME TO EAT MORE GREENS

BABY BLUES
BY KIRKMAN & SCOTT

POINK! POINK! POINK! POINK! POINK!

THEY SELL SEEDLESS WATERMELONS, YOU KNOW.

THIS ONE WAS ON SALE.

YESTERDAY'S ANSWER

RIPE T A S K
A T O N E L A N G A E
K A L E L A L G A E
E L I D I S C E R N
D I S S E N T L E E
C H A S E S A D
S T R I P
S O S A N O D E
A N Y D I S T E N D
D I S S E N T F A R
O P T I N E D U C E
B E E R S P O S T S
E R R S T E S S