

#Womenwill

High dropout rate among girls

Address the core problem

A government report has revealed that the dropout rate of girls at the secondary level stands at 42 percent. It is higher than the dropout rate of boys at secondary level, which is 33.43 percent. When the overall secondary school dropout rate has been declining, this high dropout rate of girls is worrisome.

In 2015, 45.92 percent of girls left school at secondary level, against 33.72 percent boys. This means although a little progress has been made in keeping the girls at schools, we still have a long way to go.

While poverty is the main reason behind such a high number of dropouts among girls, because it forces them to leave school and work as domestic help, another major reason is child marriage. Also, girls have to face many forms of sexual harassment on their way to and from school.

The education minister has said that the government has been providing the students with all necessary support including free textbooks and stipends. While we believe that these are very important steps taken by the government, we also believe that in order to keep our girls at school, the government must take the issue of child marriage seriously and stop it at all costs. To do so, annulment of the special provision in the Child Marriage Restraint Act is a must. In addition, child labour must be banned so that girls are not forced to work as domestic help. Also, the safety of girls must be ensured so that they can attend school without any trouble. If the government can ensure these, the dropout rate of girls at secondary level should come down considerably.

Blatant defiance of highway rules continue

What are authorities doing about it?

WE reported a road crash on the Dhaka-Chittagong highway that resulted in 10 deaths and 30 injured on February 27 because the driver was busy talking on his mobile phone! The very next day we caught on film, a covered van driving on the wrong side of the highway in the Sonargaon upazila of Narayanganj district.

Analysis by BUET's Accident Research Institute (ACI) taking into account road accidents from 1998 - 2015 informs us that 53 percent of accidents are due to speeding and reckless driving. The second biggest reason is drivers' casual mindset about breaking rules and showing little regard for safety of others on roads that accounts for 37 percent of accidents. With some 3.3 million vehicles plying our roads and highways and where only 1.8 million drivers have valid licenses, it does not come as a surprise that there are so many accidents on our busy highways on which heavy vehicles like buses and trucks travel. Media report compilations put the average number of people dying due to road accidents is 9 people every day.

So, what are the authorities doing about this? According to BRTA, it has mobile courts on the highways, but nothing close to the numbers needed. Is it merely a question of mobile courts, or is it more to do with allowing the illegal trade in fake licenses to flourish, looking the other way as unfit vehicles magically obtain fitness certificates every year and the lack of enforcement of traffic rules by the police? At the end of the day, the government has an obligation to protect its people from such murderous attitude of drivers breaking the laws of the road. Until policymakers decide to plug the holes in the system and make law enforcers accountable for failing to uphold the law, casualties on the highways will not see a downward trend.



RUBANA HUQ

KNOT SO TRUE
 BEING a woman meant landing in Tokyo at 6:30 in the morning, catching up with a dear friend over a coffee in her car while being picked up from the airport,

ending up at the Hotel at 9:00, only to run straight to the restroom to change and hurry out with luggage, not even having time to check in, and ultimately carrying the same bag to the conference, without being able to leave it with the concierge in the absence of a room number.

That's being a woman.

Being a woman means having taken the last possible flight, in order to maximise the time spent at the office back at home on the day of departure. Being a woman means writing an op-ed piece for *The Daily Star*, on her way back home, in the transit area of a quiet airport, at the ungodly hour of 4:00 in the morning.

Being a woman means always wearing a "rush" label.

Well, this woman is incidentally your columnist, who was heading for the office of Google in Tokyo. She had forgotten that Japan runs on time and there's no waiting for anyone. So the two hour long ride from the airport killed her dreams of being on time. After her briefest ever encounter with the hotel lobby (not even check-in), she had hopped into a car with strangers who were women and still strangers at that time.

Less than 20 of us (all Asian women) ended up being part of a discussion hosted by Google on its initiative for economic empowerment. Google calls it "Womenwill", a name which entertains the power of today along with the promise of tomorrow. And indeed, Womenwill had truly brought together a group of truly diverse women. The group had it all: serial entrepreneurs, a musician, a talk show host, a writer, a racing car driver, a professor, editor et al. A few of us were "multi-hyphenates," though a few were also focused on single issues and were yet curious about almost everything in life. All of us also had only one thing in common: passion for enabling the full potential of women through economic empowerment. We

were carefully reminded that though attainment in education for women has gone up, though political empowerment is on the rise, though health has dropped a bit, economic participation and opportunity still happen to be hugely dipping. We needed to remember that in spite of World Economic Forum (WEF) summit in Davos being chaired entirely by women for the first time in 48 years, the statistics from their own end told a grim tale.

Globally women make less than men for work of equal value. The wage gap is around 23 percent. Fifty-five percent women, even in the European Union, have experienced sexual harassment at least once since they were 15. Thirty-two percent of these women experienced this

These are not merely numbers. These are all stories by their own merit. These are chapters that we don't write about or aptly address. Can leaders champion this agenda? Can digital literacy help? Can inclusive workplaces become a reality?

In an active discussion, by noon, all of us at Google's office in Tokyo, had become immersed in each other's work.

While discussing India's *Internet Saathi* programme, it became apparent that somewhere as close as rural India, in spite of the world becoming connected, there's an online gender gap. Only one in ten internet users is a woman. Google is now attempting to bridge this divide and has started targeting 300,000 women through this initiative, where women ambassadors

taught in universities while racing, a few who wore hijabs and yet pursued their supremely successful businesses, one who wrote and inspired women to be brave and many more.

I, at my humble end, remained focused on the internet access challenges and limitations of our female readymade garment workers. Would they ever be able to calculate their own wages, track their benefits online? Could Google help us address digital challenges of almost 3 million female workers in Bangladesh? Could Womenwill come to Bangladesh?

Meanwhile, by the end of the day, I had learnt two useful Japanese words: 1) *Mottainai*; 2) *Gaman*.

All of us in the room on the 43rd floor of Google's office agreed that *Mottainai*, an



ILLUSTRATION: FAHIM ANZOOM

at their workplaces. One out of every five women under 50 have experienced physical and/or sexual violence by an intimate partner within the year. In 89 countries, women and girls make up for 330 million of the poor. Almost 81 percent men of working age are in the workforce whereas only 54 percent women take part in the formal economy. Currently women generate only 37 percent of the GDP. A bare minimum of 14 percent of economically active women serve in leadership roles, compared to 30 percent of men. Latest statistics from UN Women also shares that by optimising the women labour force, the global GDP could jump from USD 12 trillion to USD 28 trillion by 2025.

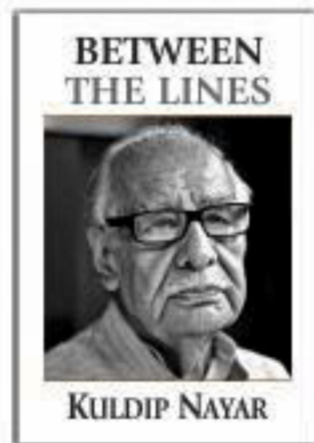
train and educate women on the benefits of internet in their daily lives. Suggestion of launching a voice triggered application for women in Bangladesh had instantly become a point of discussion. Women need to be taught about the best uses of their phone, simply because online liberates. For instance, online spaces like "Sheroes", founded by Sairee Chahal aims to put 100 million women on the growth road map by 2022. Clad in sneakers, Sairee, an Aspen Leadership Fellow and a serial entrepreneur from India, also has a "Dude Alert" when a male joins the community and fakes the profile of a woman. While I only speak of her, there were others amongst who founded the only TV channel for women, one who

expression of regret relating to a useful thing going to waste, is not how we would allow other women to define their lives. The second agreement was refusing to let *Gaman*, (a Japanese term of Zen Buddhist origin meaning stoic endurance) turn us into complicit creatures and that, in spite of our pressures and losses, we must move on and spread courage in a contagious manner.

After all, in Tokyo and beyond, we were all passionate women, inseparable on critical issues, hell bent on creating empowerment spaces by unboxing leadership biases and challenging norms.

Rubana Huq is the managing director of Mohammadi Group.

Where did we go wrong?



KULDIP NAYAR

BETWEEN THE LINES
 I have always wondered where we went wrong. After adopting a constitution which was secular in letter and spirit, we have strayed into the territory where every pebble is an

impediment to the journey towards pluralism. India's first Prime Minister, Jawaharlal Nehru, said on the night of August 14-15, 1947, in parliament and what became popularly known as "Tryst with Destiny" speech:

"The future beckons to us... We have hard work ahead. There is no resting for any one of us till we redeem our pledge in full, till we make all the people of

Nehru were so emotionally surcharged that they out-rightly rejected the proposal of reservations in employment and educational institutions as were discussed in the Constitution Assembly which Sardar Patel, then Home Minister, was offering. The Muslim leaders said in both houses of parliament that they did not want anything separate or special. They regretted that they were misled and unwittingly sowed the seeds of partition.

Qaid-e-Azam Mohammad Ali Jinnah reportedly wanted more and more concessions for Muslims but not separation. But somewhere along, the demand for Pakistan came to be raised. It swept the Muslims off their feet.

Lord Mountbatten whom I have interviewed at length at Broadlands, near London, where he lived told me that Clement Atlee, the then Prime Minister, asked him to see if the two countries

gallery, and listening to Nehru making the "Tryst with Destiny" speech. That was 70 years ago. Today, when the head of a fanatic organisation, Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS), is looking to "consolidate" Hindu vote in state elections and in the coming general election in 2019, I ask myself: Where did we go wrong?

Mohan Bhagwat, the RSS chief, spent nearly a fortnight, travelling to Bihar and Uttar Pradesh, the two most populous states of the country, where caste fissures run deep and caste and religion arithmetic decides the fate of candidates. In other words, the political outcome at the centre is dependent on the monolithic Hindu voters of the two states.

The RSS chief has been unequivocal while addressing the large crowd recently as he exhorted the Hindus to overcome

the attack on a Dalit family in Una and the rise of the Bhim Army, following clashes between Dalits and Rajputs in UP's Saharanpur. The RSS is said to believe that these are the groups that are covertly supported by the "ultra" Left.

Bhagwat during his speech also tried to stem the rot that has set in after the central government's recent economic policies which affected the farmers and small and medium enterprises which are against the BJP-led NDA. Though the RSS spokesman put up a brave front saying that the visit of the RSS chief was meant to meet the functionaries, it was reportedly to appease the voters as there is a sense of concern within the Sangh *parivar* over the possibility of caste groupings that could jeopardise the BJP chances at the Centre.

Its deep anxiety on the possibility of a Dalit-Muslim combine emerging in Bihar is understandable because it could cobble together a formidable opposition to upstage the BJP. Hence the RSS is seen building bridges and reaching out to the economically backward classes, particularly the Kurmi and Kori communities, from which it did not get support.

The visits of Bhagwat to Bihar and UP are meant to garner the support the BJP needs to renew their tenure at the Centre, apart from its plans to have the RSS presence in every village as the Sangh is planning to attract more people to its fold. The concerted efforts of RSS to woo the Hindus, with help coming from the Janata Dal (United) of Sharad Yadav, are very much a part of the push to sustain its hold.

The role of Bihar Chief Minister Nitish Kumar is deplorable. For the sake of protecting his government, he has accepted the support of divisive elements which he has fought against all his life. He has tried to defend his move to have the BJP along but it looks like a *tamasha*. A person who has categorical secular credentials, which was lauded by even the extreme left, has compromised his stand to stay in power.

The fact is that the secular forces have not been able to stem the tide of Hindutva. The Congress is too weak to get people to rededicate themselves to the Idea of India: A democratic and secular country. The BJP with Narendra Modi as Prime Minister looks formidable because the magic of Modi has not waned yet. Probably, the next election in 2019 may go his way. I only hope and pray that the nation would get back to the secular track.

Kuldip Nayar is an eminent Indian columnist.



Jawaharlal Nehru gives his "Tryst with Destiny" speech at Parliament House in New Delhi in 1947.

PHOTO: AFP

India what destiny intended them to be. We are citizens of a great country on the verge of bold advance, and we have to live up to that high standard. All of us, to whatever religion we may belong, are equally the children of India with equal rights, privileges and obligations. We cannot encourage communalism or narrow-mindedness, for no nation can be great whose people are narrow in thought or in action..."

could have something in common. Jinnah categorically said no to the suggestion. He said he did not trust them now because after accepting the Cabinet Mission Plan, which provided a weak Centre, they had gone back on the arrangement of grouping where the Hindu-majority Assam was a part. Subsequently, they came to accept the Plan but Jinnah had lost confidence.

I was one of those fortunate people to be in parliament, sitting in the press

the differences of caste. His remark was sharp and pointed when he said: "Hindus should be united. Division in society over caste and violence over the issues are the biggest hurdles in achieving this unity and there are forces that take advantage of it."

Apparently, the RSS chief had the non-Hindu voters in mind. Probably, his renewed push for consolidation had also something to do with the emergence of political entities like Jignesh Mevani after

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

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Reform quota system

It is very unjust that Bangladesh reserves 56 percent of government jobs for candidates with quotas. It is not fair or righteous that nearly half a century after the liberation war, 30 percent of government job positions are reserved for descendants of freedom fighters. Experts, academics and former bureaucrats are nearly in consensus that the quota system hinders appointment of qualified candidates for public service and that it should be reformed.

As a student myself, I'm gravely concerned about my future. Many students like me are demanding the quota system be reformed. I believe that our government should seriously consider reforming this unjust and unfair system.
 Tapan Kumar Ghosh, By e-mail

Talk show effect

Talk shows on electronic media are now very popular. Discussions on contemporary politics, government policies, the law and order situation, justice, trade and business, freedom of press and electronic media are the main topics, in general. Talk shows become lively when the discussants' arguments contain substantial information and logic. In most cases, however, the participants try to win by attacking their opponents with a loud voice and aggressive body language.

Can we expect talk show participants to be more respectful of each other's diverse viewpoints?
 Khondaker Shahirul Islam, By e-mail