

In memory of Simeen Mahmud

WAHIDUDDIN MAHMUD

It is both difficult and painful to write an obituary of a spouse, particularly if the death is an untimely one. Yet many friends and academic colleagues of Simeen, my wife who has recently died at a Harvard hospital within hours of being rushed to the emergency room, have requested me to do so since they think that she was both my "intellectual and life's partner". In fact, only a couple of days before her fatal illness she was discussing with me about garment workers' lives in Bangladesh, on which she was doing a collaborative research and was trying to meet a deadline for writing a paper for a seminar in Berlin.

Simeen started her research career in demography while pursuing higher studies at the London School of Hygiene and Tropical Medicine and later as a Fellow at Harvard Centre for Population Studies. Later she moved on to a wide range of fields in gender-related development studies. Although she held many visiting positions abroad and collaborated with many global research consortia, she spent her entire professional career in Bangladesh, first at the Bangladesh Institute of Development Studies and later at Brac University.

The high esteem in which she was held by her peers in the global academic community is evident from the tributes attributed to her in the obituary announcements by many academic and research institutions worldwide including the University of Manchester, the Institute of Development Studies at Sussex University, Berlin Free University, the World Bank and various global research networks—besides the numerous condolence messages from leading academics in her field. She has been described as a pioneering researcher from South Asia in gender studies and women's empowerment—the topics on which her research was widely published in leading international academic journals. The memorial tributes mention her partnerships and mentoring role in various international research consortia that "enriched the intellectual debates on development, citizenship and gender." I and my family are thankful for the deep appreciation of her life and work expressed in those



Simeen Mahmud

messages of condolence.

In one of her earliest works published in the *Population Studies*, the journal of the London School of Economics, she analysed household survey data to debunk the then prevalent hypothesis that the fertility rate in Bangladesh was high because poor households benefit from having many children. Her later research showed that, while easy availability of contraceptives through "social marketing" helped lowering the fertility rate, there was already latent demand for such birth control as evident from the survey findings regarding desired number of children being lower than the actual; this was before Bangladesh's surprising success in reducing the population growth rate attracted global attention. Her research findings also gave the early indication that female participation

in agricultural work, not just within the homestead but also work in the field, was more substantial than thought at that time and was fast growing—a finding that was vindicated by subsequent findings from the official Labour Force Surveys. Later on, she published extensively on the phenomena of increasing female labour force participation in Bangladesh, both in rural and urban areas, and its links with global markets and implications for workers' livelihoods. Another area of her research focus was the equity aspects of the provision of public health services, particularly in respect to reproductive health among poor women.

Simeen was extremely meticulous in conducting field surveys that were required for her research. In our private conversations, she often

expressed concerns about the way academics use fancy analytical tools to analyse data from field surveys without caring to know the quality of those data or how carefully the surveys were conducted. She used to joke about how rural women in Bangladesh, confronted with survey questionnaire, often answer a question in the form of another question; like if you ask: do you use contraceptives, the answer can be: why not? It is up to you to interpret that answer as yes or no! She used to say that collecting data from the respondents, in her case mostly women household members, was like peeling onions layer by layer—you can get to the truth only by getting rid of the superficial initial responses. Once while conducting a rural household survey, her research team found that the women in a particular village were

habitually secretive and prone to lying and you could get any truth out of them only by first cross-checking with the neighbours. In another village in a *haor* area, they found after much probing that the main occupation of the majority of households were stealing!

She also used to tell me about many moving experiences from field surveys. While conducting a repeat survey in a north Bengal village following the 1988 floods, she asked a woman whom she had interviewed the previous year about her husband, and the woman quietly pointed to the ground below her bed; apparently that was the only raised ground available for burial during the floods. She had deep compassion for the poor households whom she surveyed and was genuinely interested in the reality of their livelihood challenges. During

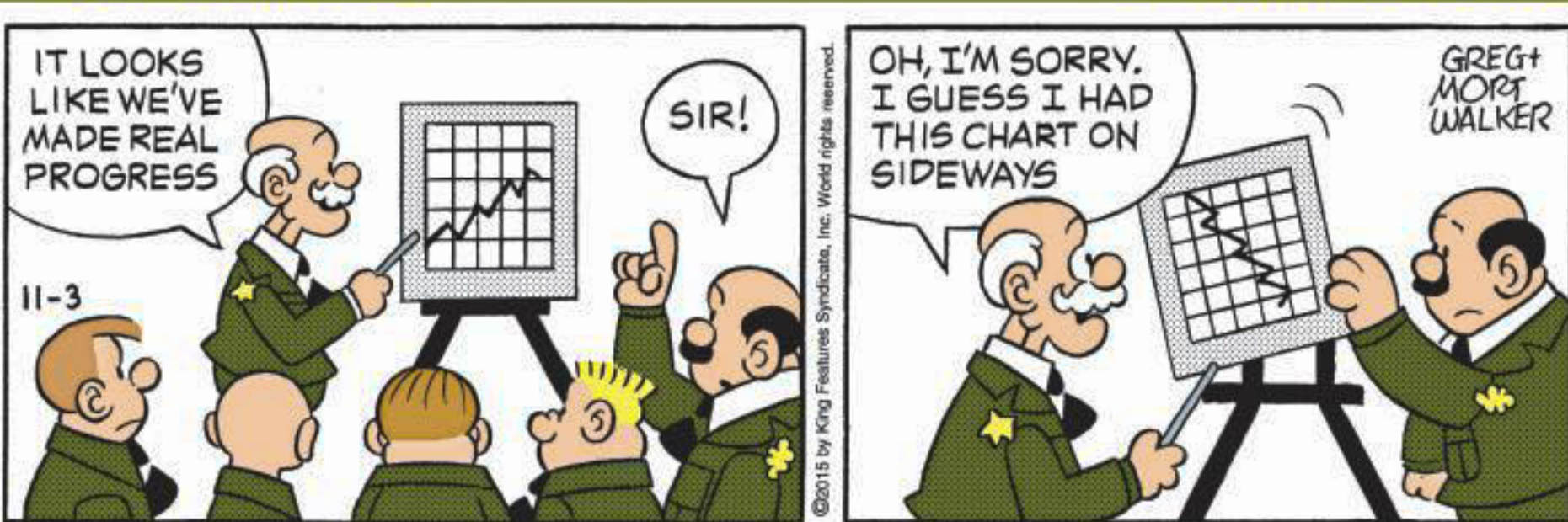
her field visits, as an aside, she would also carry on with her motivational campaigns for birth control or child education.

While doing a research on the plight of garment workers in Bangladesh, she made a short documentary film on the lives of a group of young female workers whom she came to know closely. She was deeply saddened when one of them died from being electrocuted in her house—an evidence of poor living conditions that she wanted to depict in that film. In her research she always sought to reveal the reality of the lives of poor households, especially women, which often lie hidden behind the mere statistics gathered from surveys. That is what subsequently motivated her to find innovative indicators that truly could capture female empowerment in the socio-economic settings such as in Bangladesh and led to her to publishing several research papers on this topic in reputed journals like the *World Development and Feminist Economics*.

I shall refrain from writing anything on our personal life since she always felt awkward in discussing her feelings on such matters except among close friends. In one of her rare public comments in this regard in a television interview, she apologetically mentioned that the burden of looking after the children fell on me during her frequent and often prolonged stays abroad in her early research career. Being an ardent advocate of women's rights—though not as an activist but through her research—she used to take some pride in telling her friends that as her husband I shared household chores with her. In reality, she used to only make a pretence of such work-sharing with me, always careful that I did not have to do anything that was not to my liking or burdensome on me. That deceit was perhaps the only notable exception in her otherwise steadfast approach of always practicing what she preached. She used to tell me that she wanted to outlive me, since she could not bear the thought of my living alone into old age. But God Almighty had other plans. May her soul rest in peace.

Wahiduddin Mahmud retired as Professor of Economics at the University of Dhaka. He is currently Chairman of the South Asia Network of Economic Research Institutes (SANET).

BEETLE BAILEY BY MORT WALKER



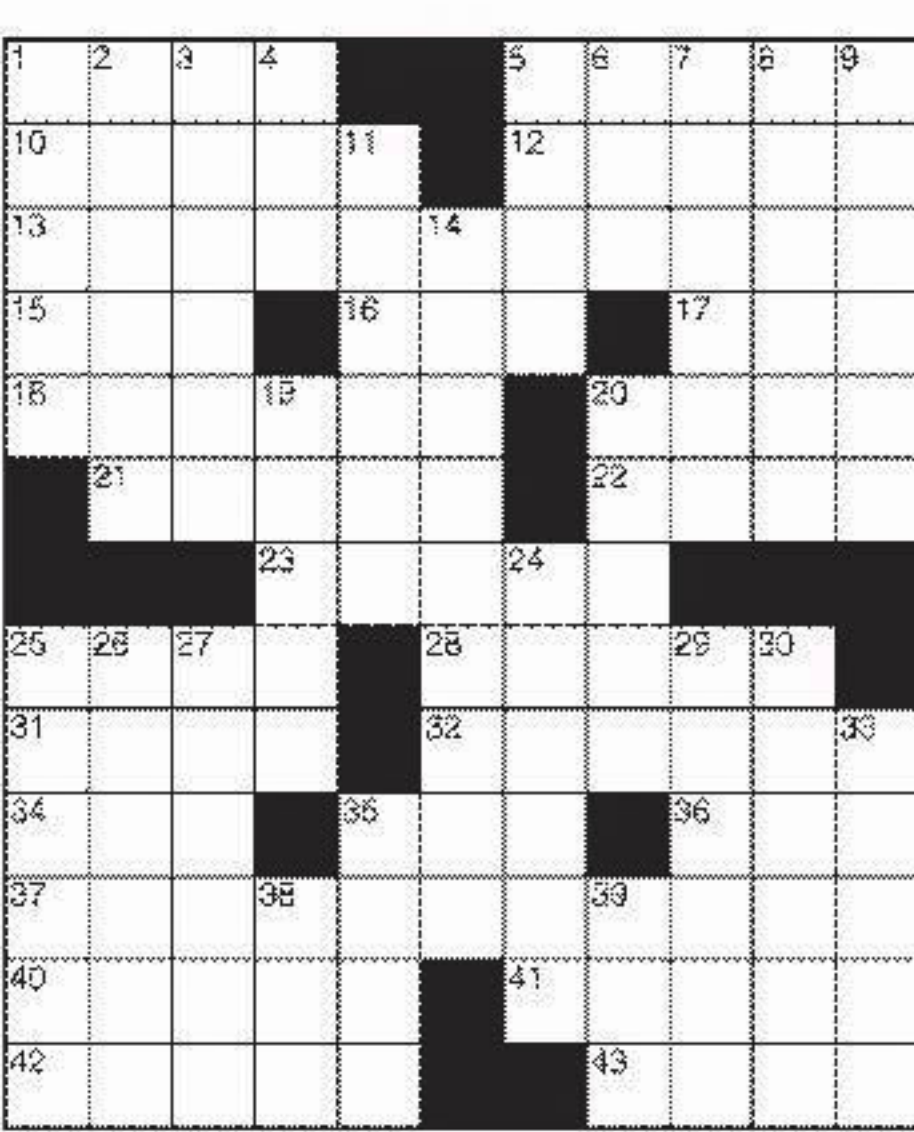
BABY BLUES BY KIRKMAN & SCOTT



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|--------------------------------|-----------------------------------|------------------------|
| ACROSS | 32 Keys | 8 Composer Elgar |
| 1 God of war | 34 Olympics jersey initials | 9 Mortises' partners |
| 5 West Point student | 35 Month after avril | 11 Monkey |
| 10 Alamo setting | 36 Neckline shape | 14 From Oslo, say |
| 12 Battery end | 37 Job for cops and TSA screeners | 19 Hunter in the sky |
| 13 Dissing | 40 Inventor Howe | 20 Deadly |
| 15 Dry-bone | 41 Bare | 24 Quit |
| 16 Bartender on "The Simpsons" | 42 Fashionably dated | 25 Poor person |
| 17 China chairman | 43 Sleep sites | 26 Marked down |
| 18 "The Bathers" painter | DOWN | 27 Fight |
| 20 Forest plant | 1 How some stocks are sold | 29 Take back |
| 21 Sipping aid | 2 Finds another purpose for | 30 Worried |
| 22 Totals | 3 Still existing | 33 Transmits |
| 23 Like neon | 4 Used a couch | 35 Japanese beam paste |
| 25 Possum of the comics | 5 Canary's home | 38 Gooney stuff |
| 28 Bike parts | 6 What's more | 39 Bit of ointment |
| 31 Shortly, in poetry | 7 Sure to fail | |

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