

## Abuse of domestic workers must stop!

### Little Lamia's nightmare

THE picture of Lamia, an 11-year-old domestic worker, with a bruised face and injury marks all over her body, published in this daily yesterday, is a sad example of how little we have done to ensure that our children have a harassment and torture-free childhood.

Lamia was frequently tortured by her employers during the last six months she had been employed at their house in Barishal. According to the child, her employers used to torture her regularly, lock her up inside a room and shave her head so that her hair would not fall on food. Sadly, Lamia's case is not an exceptional one. There are hundreds of such cases across the country. And domestic workers not only face physical torture, they often face sexual harassment by their employers. According to a recent study, 66 percent domestic workers suffer mental torture, while 7 percent of them are raped.

However, compared to the incidents of violence against domestic workers, cases are filed only in a few of the incidents. The reasons are also known to us. The perpetrators are usually influential people and the victims are from a poor economic background; most of the families do not have the money and courage to file or run the cases. And in most of the cases, the issues are settled outside the court by threatening the victims' families and also by bribing law enforcers.

In view of the situation, we suggest such cases be filed by the government itself. If that can be done, we can hope to see some of the perpetrators convicted in the future.

Moreover, the law that exists for the protection and welfare of domestic workers should be strictly implemented. Although the Labour Act 2013 (amended) has fixed the minimum age for admission to work at 14 years, it does not include domestic workers. Thus we suggest that there should be a strict law against employing underage children in households.

## Fatal road crashes continue

### Traffic violators are undeterred

ACCORDING to the count of a leading Bangla daily, so far 5,354 lives have been lost to road crashes this year which comes to about 601 people dying every day. And this is excluding the number of people killed yesterday or today. This is an unacceptable, horrific number of deaths due to violation of basic traffic rules. It is especially disillusioning in the backdrop of the passionate movement for road safety by students followed by special drives from the government side to enforce traffic laws.

Does this mean that all these endeavours have done nothing to make sure reckless drivers, underage drivers, drivers without valid licenses, unfit vehicles are kept off the roads? Does this mean that as soon as the traffic week is over it is business as usual?

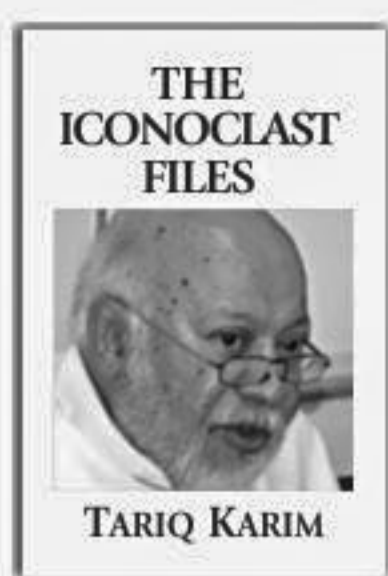
The Road Transport Act-2018 passed this September, has provisions of five years' imprisonment for causing death by reckless driving, a punishment deemed lenient by road safety campaigners who think this will not be a strong enough deterrent. Judging from the unabated incidence of deaths on the road because of violation of traffic rules, it seems the Act has made little dent in this horrendous situation. Unfortunately transport owners and workers have strongly opposed more stringent punishments, manifested by transport strikes that threaten to paralyse the cities and towns.

Despite the heart-breaking deaths of two school children that led to a nationwide movement by students demanding safer roads, there have been instances of vehicles crashing into school students and killing them. Meanwhile, in the main highways death follows every trip because of reckless driving (such as random overtaking) and unfit vehicles.

We appeal to the authorities to enforce traffic rules with greater commitment. This will entail more stringent action against traffic violators despite the pressure from transport owners and transport workers to avoid accountability of those who cause death and injury to people.

# Addressing the critical challenge to our water security

## A governance structure to holistically manage the waters commons



TARIQ KARIM

AT the very core of our entire ecosystem is the location and availability of fresh water on which sustaining lives and human livelihood are fundamentally dependent. One

school of thought envisages future wars being fought over steadily depleting water resources, required by humans, other species and vegetation that sustain both. To prevent this situation from deteriorating further to the point that it could become an existential threat for man's survival in whatever geo-space he inhabits, we need to engage in collaborative management of the shared ecological space and resources, particularly fresh water resources that are critically taxed and in a state of alarming depletion today.

A steady growth of population in South Asia has made this region one of the most densely populated globally, with very large numbers subsisting on marginal land. This region, comprising Afghanistan, Bangladesh, Bhutan, India, Maldives, Nepal, Pakistan, and Sri Lanka, has, as of 2015, a combined aggregate total of over 1.743 billion, registering a staggering 336 percent increase over a mere 476 million in 1950. It will almost double its present numbers by 2050. Its burgeoning demographic "youth bulge" is a factor of critical importance. South Asia's average percentage of population between ages 15-59 in 2015 was 60.75; in 2050, this average is projected to be 60.88 (ECOSOC 2015). The trend of population growth, unless reversed or brought to a halt, will surely add pressure on already tight food and water supplies.

For a deltaic region like Bangladesh, which is the natural drainage for most of the Eastern Himalayan rivers, a double-whammy effect is already in progress. The sheer increase in population and the cumulative effects of glacier melts in the Himalayas (Himalayan glaciers have reportedly shrunk from 500,000 square kms coverage to 160,000 square kilometres) and depleted ground water aquifers are already significantly adversely impacting the availability of fresh water supplies.

Bangladesh finds itself in an extremely vulnerable situation in respect to water security, despite being a land of countless rivers comprising three major river basins, of which 54 rivers are shared with India, its immediate upper riparian. An incompletely executed bilateral treaty exists on only one of the shared rivers (The Ganges), while an agreed draft on another remains frozen in a state of suspended animation. Taking a river-by-river approach would leave Bangladesh very vulnerable to the vagaries of nature and the unpredictability of geopolitics.

The narrative of sharing, furthermore, is evocative of the partitioning of waters which leads into the realm of contestation. In fact, most of the problems contributing to this situation of increasing water distress may be squarely attributed to The Partition Syndrome of 1947. While segmenting land and territories on *terra firma* is entirely feasible and achievable, what was forgotten in the heat of inflamed passions at that time was that the principles of partitioning land cannot be applied to the hydrosphere, atmosphere and ecosphere.

In my view, this fallacious thinking was reflected in the formulation of the Constitution of the new Indian Union of 1947, in which sovereignty of the rivers was accorded to the respective states of the Union through which those rivers traversed. This is at the heart of the myriad problems of water sharing that India has struggled with over almost all of its rivers,

viable governance structure for collectively and jointly managing their common waters, South Asians must put in place a governance structure to reasonably manage their shared water commons. In 2010, participating in a dialogue contemplating what South Asia's response would be to the non-traditional scenario likely to buffet the region in 2025 (extrapolating from then existing and known facts and situation on the ground), I had advocated the formation of a comprehensive, multi-bodied architecture of cooperative mechanism that South Asians, I had hoped, would have the common sense to move towards, chastened by an angered Mother Nature and an enraged environment. I repeat that call today, with a greater sense of urgency than ever before, for collective consideration by all South Asians, to come together to put in place a South Asian Water Security Authority (SAWSA).

distribute/disperse unexpected seasonal surges of flood waters evenly, with populations in vulnerable areas being properly educated and trained to deal with such events.

Service roads should be constructed along one or both banks along the entire course of a river to the extent possible. Also, each bank should be lined with a belt of several rows of indigenous trees that serve to enhance carbon sequestration areas. Maintenance of these will be done throughout the year on a continuing basis, involving the local population along the course of the river, who will act as guardians of the rivers. This will create a constant bank of employment for the local people, integrate with rural employment schemes that are gender-blind, be more labour-intensive rather than capital-intensive; it will also generate local wealth besides creating a sense of local ownership of the commons as well as



Farakka Barrage across the Ganges River.

PHOTO: STAR

whether within its domestic sphere or with the post-Partition transnational configuration of those rivers.

The conditions described above pose several challenges today for the entire region. Governments must now cater to overall ecological and environmental security, food security, water security, energy security, employment security, and health security. Additionally, governments also must prepare for unexpected disasters from natural phenomena or threats of disease pandemics breaking out. Ensuring water security and integrity is perhaps the most important of all, water being vital for agriculture, industrial use, fisheries, human consumption, health and sanitation, but addressing this will pose formidable challenges. Towards this end, all governments now have no alternative but to collectively address and treat rivers—and indeed all sources of fresh waters—as Commons.

To move towards putting in place a

SAWSA's water security mandate should exercise overall jurisdiction over all types of water bodies, viz. ground water aquifers, surface water, rainwater and even sea water. It should be tasked with monitoring and managing all water resources in the region in a holistic manner to regulate conservation of these resources as well as to prevent abuse or wastage. For managing surface water resources, SAWSA should establish an empowered subsidiary body, namely the Eastern Himalayan River Basins Management Body (EHRBMB), to deal with the Ganges, Brahmaputra, Meghna and related basins. This body will undertake to train the entire course of each river, including its tributaries and distributaries, through building embankments, dredging, creating small-to-medium sized pondage areas to serve not only as reservoirs but also for hydroelectricity generating projects. Where deemed necessary, flood drainage canals will also be excavated to

ensuring continuous maintenance. As guardians of these rivers, the local communities will comprise an early warning system alerting concerned authorities to the impending risk or dangers to the river and its environ.

South Asians need to come together, for the sake of self-preservation at least, if nothing else, to pacify Nature, arrest and start rolling back the grievous damage that they have thoughtlessly inflicted on the common ecosphere, and to collectively manage, conserve, and restore the health of their shared river basins for optimum use of their steadily diminishing water resources. We must do it now, not later. Procrastinating on collectively and collaboratively addressing an existential challenge can never be an option for this region ready to burst at its seams.

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# Power, consent, and my newsroom

## Let's hope that local stories challenge the culture of complacency in our workplaces.

SUBINA SHRESTHA

NEARLY two decades ago, I was at a big party in Nagarkot in Nepal, organised to welcome the new millennium, with delegates from all over the world. I was there as the master of ceremony or something to that effect. The last few hours of 1999 were a cold and misty winter night. While I was dressed up in warm jumpers, there was a fashion show taking place at the same venue. The models shivered behind the stage in what appeared to be a summer fashion line. The next thing I remember is the chief guest, a senior minister in the government, casually putting his hand on my thigh. I pushed it away. There were many colleagues, mostly men, around me, some of whom laughed uncomfortably. Others looked away. The only thought in my head was: if this minister does this to me in public, how does he act around other women?

The minister was well known for his misdemeanour towards women. I had even confronted him as a journalist on one occasion, not long after news of him misbehaving towards a woman made it to the papers. A colleague who witnessed my rather public aggression towards him was slightly dismayed—at me—not at him. Contrary to what women are supposed to do, I made my colleague uncomfortable. He had chosen not to confront this minister. And clearly, the news had done nothing to deter this minister's sense of entitlement nor his political ambitions.

Yes, it bothered me. My primary response even then was an annoyance at this minister. In hindsight, I probably got angry that I did not punch him or scream. Yet it is not surprising that I chose not to make a scene. By the time the initial shock subsided, I probably thought that

making a noise would not even help. While I don't remember my justification, I do know that women, in these situations, are trained not to attract attention to themselves. And it was not like anything was going to change for this man. Neither did I expect anything better of him. But I did expect better from my colleagues. What I remember the most is the deep disappointment with my male colleagues who had laughed it off. I felt betrayed by them.

I left mainstream Nepali journalism not long after the Nagarkot incident and I had thought that I had left Meena in the company of friends in the newsroom. I should have known, they were the kinds of "friends" who would look on as a lecherous guy would try and violate their "friend". How often have I seen my journalist compatriots sit and dissect a woman—one body part at a time? Even those who have not actively harassed women have taken the cowardly path of

I shouldn't expect journalists to be any different from the rest of society. The culture of patriarchy and misogyny runs deep and women from all professional fields have experienced sexual harassment and abuse. But journalists are expected to hold truth to power. How can those who misuse their own power hold anyone to account? How can they ever have the moral conviction to stand up for justice for women when they themselves feel that they are entitled to violate them?

I'm sharing my story to let Nepali women know that they are not alone. Most of us are working in spaces, sometimes with almost all male colleagues. Whether it is newsrooms or hospitals or corporate spaces, the leadership is almost always male and as women, we have often forced ourselves to ignore the male gaze, the discomfort of that extra caress or the outright cases of abuse and harassments. How different it would have been had the leadership of these institutions were led by women?

And women have been right to think that the support of many of their male colleagues might be nothing but platitudes. I'm also writing this now with hope—a hope that workplaces will be safer for women; a hope that no other woman will have to leave for a safer space to work in; the hope that workplaces can groom women to be the next generation of leaders, where men will be allies and friends.

I am writing this with the hope that no woman journalist in the future will have to write a piece about facing harassments—and have that space to be the kind of journalist who can hold truth to power.

Subina Shrestha is an award-winning journalist and filmmaker.

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## LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

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### Reducing Dhaka's population

Dhaka has recently been branded as the second worst city in the world to live in by the Economist Intelligence Unit (EIU). The ranking simply confirms what we have always known.

This is mainly because Dhaka is an extremely overpopulated city. It is perhaps one of the reasons why Dhaka has not done well when it comes to urban development and planning.

Yet, Dhaka still provides the most opportunities for jobseekers. In addition, those who lose everything due to climate change in the coastal regions come to Dhaka to take shelter and build a new life. Therefore, the city's population will only increase should things continue the way they are.

On top of it, successive governments have made Dhaka the centre of literally everything. This needs to change. The government should adopt a long-term decentralisation plan, under which, major government offices would be distributed around the country. If the government begins decentralising itself, large businesses will follow suit.

Mohammad Mehedi Hasan, East West University



SOURCE: NEWSLAUNDRY.COM

When I shared my experience on Twitter last week, it was neither for vengeance nor sympathy. As women, all around the world, started sharing their #MeToo stories, my initial thought was that my workplace has been safe for me. Then my friend and former colleague, Meena Kaini, wrote about her harrowing experiences—being forcefully kissed by a colleague and, at another time, a colleague and a mentor coming up to her hotel room and refusing to leave. As she wrote on Twitter, her experiences are not half as bad as the experiences of many other women in Nepali newsrooms.

being complicit in harassment.

In May 2008, I was working with Al Jazeera. On the day the king stepped down, there was a press conference at Narayanhiti palace. As I squeezed through the small door of the palace gate, tripod in my hand, locked in the crowd, one man behind me, decided that he would get away by running his hand along my breast. It was difficult to turn around. By the time I did, there were several men—my supposed colleagues of the esteemed journalism fraternity. They all looked at me as if nothing happened. I don't know who violated me that day but one of my compatriots did.