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BYS: COMMITTED TO WOMEN'S SAFETY



ASHLEY SHOPTORSHI SAMADDAR

In Bangladesh, the stigma surrounding violence against women means that many women do not get the justice they deserve. Bearing that in mind, the Barishal Youth Society (BYS) has been working to stop child marriages and help female victims of domestic violence, with 10,000 members and 800 active volunteers in different ways since 2014.

Last year, BYS successfully stopped 257 child marriages and helped 109 female survivors of domestic violence to take legal measures against their offenders. They further contributed to the progress of these women by creating employment opportunities for nineteen of them through a vocational training programme. The community has been working with over 1,400 female teenagers and 650 adult women in over six districts in the Barishal division. "When these women and children are safe and sound, it feels like we have changed their world. This is what

inspires us the most," says Faez Belal, the founder of BYS.

Along with building a safe environment for women and girls, BYS works to equip them with the power of education. Through their initiative, a number of girls have appeared in the HSC (14) and SSC (7) examinations. They have also arranged computer training sessions for over 500 rural women and plan to conduct such skill-based programmes on a broader scale soon. BYS also operates 24 'Girl Empowerment' support centres, where legal advice and awareness campaigns on education and skill-based vocational diplomas are conducted for women. However, their most successful initiative was the Youth Fest held in 2017, through which they emphasised on women's rights, and educated 5,000 girls about the negative consequences of child marriage.

They were also awarded with the Joy Bangla Youth Award 2017 for building a better and safer society.

The voice of youngsters

Young, first-time voters speak about what they look for in leaders of the nation

SHARMIN JOYA

With the National Poll 2018 knocking at the door, the election has garnered plenty of expectations and interest, especially among the young population. The first-time voters are surely going to play a vital role in shaping the ruling body this time. Moving around the city, we spoke to young, new voters about their views on the upcoming election.

Singer Sabrina Porshi is a voter from Uttara. "I will definitely attend vote and encourage people to do the same," she asserts. "A friendly, understanding and optimistic candidate is what I am looking for who will try reaching out to the youth." Sabrina further wants to work on creating awareness about traffic rules, as she feels that traffic congestion is one of the major issues in Bangladesh. Similarly, Tahmid Zaman Khan, a student from the University of Dhaka, who will be voting from Dhaka-15, wants to see the broadening of roads and the eradication of temporary shops on footpaths, which often lead to the violation of road laws. He believes that patriotism should be one of the defining characteristics of a leader. "The current online climate allows young voters to form a fuller picture of the candidates and their platforms in a medium they're familiar with," he adds.

Besides traffic laws, an area of concern for the young population is the safety of women and girls on the streets. For Ruponti Priya, a salesperson in a cosmetics shop, women's safety is a priority when it comes to choosing a leader. She is a student and service holder at the same time. "I have to stay outside for a long time quite regularly. But our roads are still largely unsafe for

women," she states. "I will vote for someone who will ensure women's safety, and take practical steps to implement laws for it."

Meanwhile, many voters are hopeful about seeing improvements in the education system. Independent filmmaker Vicky Zahed will vote from the Dhaka-6 area. "As a first-time voter, I wish the young candidates to be successful, as they will know the needs and demands of the youth," he says. "My strong preference will be to



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bring changes to the education system. If students are taught well and prepared well for the exams, no one will need to cheat. This is a chain process and it begins from the school years. The whole education system needs to be more careful and pay attention in teaching morality."

Moreover, the present government has given people of the third gender the right to vote for the first time. Jannat, a young transgender woman, is a first-time voter

from Dhaka-16. "The government has provided us with many jobs, and in fact, many of us were given the opportunity to be candidates in this election. I am very happy that my vote will be counted," says Jannat.

On the other hand, perhaps one of the most pressing demands among the underserved community and working-class sector of the nation is improved living conditions. While some are excited to see certain improvements, others are not so open-minded to voting. Anwar Hossain, a road-side hawker earns a living by selling chickens on the roads and comes to Dhaka, every three days by train, from Narsingdi. "I have seen people in my area starving for days, which makes me cry my heart out," he expresses. "I think that voting is a waste of time because we poor people are never benefited and our struggle remains the same."

Md Shohag Hossain, a private car driver, who grew up in Saltha, Faridpur, sees the voting day as an exciting occasion. "I want my leader to be honest and the one who listens to problems even after the election. If I were a leader, I would facilitate the farmers by bringing them improved machineries," he says. Julekha Begum from Mymensingh, who has travelled away from home to earn a living as a house maid in Dhaka, wants to vote for a candidate who will ensure safety and good health for the people of her hometown. She wants to see improved lifestyles for her people, so that no girl has to live away from her family to earn money.

Speaking to all the young minds from different walks of life, a rather optimistic energy seems to surround the spirit of the youth across the city regarding the upcoming election.



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YOUTH OPPORTUNITIES



The Obama Foundation Scholars Program 2019-2020 at Columbia University

The Obama Foundation Scholars Program will give rising young leaders around the world who are already making a difference in their communities the opportunity to take their work to the next level through a newly designed curriculum that brings together academic, skills-based, and hands-on learning.

DEADLINE: February 3, 2019 | Full Scholarship

Asia Pacific Youth Week 2019 in South Korea

Asia Pacific Youth Week 2019 is an annual event to create youth empowerment by serving them a platform to strengthen and mobilise youth with the skills and opportunities needed to be agents of impactful change. This year it will take the theme: "Leading The Generation Unlimited to Prepare for 2030".

DEADLINE: January 21, 2019 | Conference

Orion Pharma Scholarship for Medical Students

Orion Pharma Ltd. has arranged 'Orion Pharma Medical Scholarship' for students who are unable to pay their Medical college fees. This scholarship will help them to stop worrying about their education fees so that it no longer hampers their studies.

DEADLINE: January 31, 2019 | Scholarship

Wreetu: A women's health movement

PRIYANKA CHOWDHURY

Growing up, Umme Sharmin Kabir observed that even in highly educated families, menstruation was a taboo concept and not given much importance. From early on, she knew this was something that she wanted to invest her time in.

After her post-graduation from BRAC University, she started Wreetu, her dream project, with an aim to create a community of health-conscious women and girls in Bangladesh and raise awareness about menstruation, reproduction and puberty.

Wreetu began its journey in 2016 after Sharmin pitched her idea in SPARK Bangladesh. With a small grant and some of her own savings, Sharmin took the big step. Today, they are a nine-member team including on-board gynecologists, medical

trainers and volunteers. Through rigorous workshops on puberty, menstruation and reproductive health, the team reaches out to children and parents in different schools and institutions in the capital and other districts. They also have a beautifully illustrated story-based book developed for young girls. "Although young girls are the focus of the book, it is for anyone who intends to get information on puberty, reproductive health and menstruation," says Sharmin. The book, which is in the process of being out in the market, is verified by gynecologists. Their next venture is Wreetu Reusable Sanitary Napkin. "While conducting workshops, we learned that majority of the girls cannot afford sanitary napkins, and instead, use cloths, rags and even weeds when they have their periods. This is dangerous for a girl's body," says Sharmin. "We are now working on reusable and biodegradable sanitary napkins. The reusable napkins are free from chemical and bleach, and a pair of them will last almost a year. The biodegradable napkins will be made from banana fibers which are also chemical free and will prevent the users from any rashes and diseases like cervical cancer."

Recently, Sharmin represented the country in Stockholm along with three other participants at Young Connectors of the Future, initiated by Swedish institute, where she met participants from 6 different countries. She built a consortium with one of the participants from India for an online summit to present feminism through art early next year. "I will venture into every possible way to break the myths surrounding menstruation in the society. I dream of that day when girls will celebrate their first day of period and be proud," concludes Sharmin.



Umme Sharmin Kabir

PHOTO: SHEIKH MEHEDI MORSHED