

Achieving gender equality still a challenge

Policies must address discrimination

THE International Women's Day, observed yesterday, has brought to the forefront a range of issues that give us a picture of the state of women in this country. As reported by this paper, women in this country have achieved remarkable feats, regardless of the formidable challenges they confront. There are now more women in the workforce than ever and this has significantly contributed to the nation's economic development. There are also more professional women in various sectors, more entrepreneurs and social change makers who are women. Noteworthy progress has been made thanks to government and nongovernment efforts in girls' enrolment in schools, reducing maternal mortality, improving reproductive health and providing opportunities for women to earn. Yet while we celebrate these undeniable achievements of our women, we must also recognise the enormous task ahead to tackle the challenges that women face and consequently hold them back.

This is especially true for the majority of women who unfortunately happen to be poor and must constantly struggle with too many odds—violence of all kinds, at home and outside, financial insecurity, limited access to resources and little or no recognition of their unpaid work. While more girls get enrolled in schools and it has been seen that they also excel in board exams, many of them drop out at the secondary level because of early marriage, stalking and financial hardship of their families. Many girls and women end up as domestic workers which is often exploitative since they are not part of the formal workforce. Our cities, moreover, are not women-friendly—women are constantly harassed in the streets, in public transport, etc. Women from underprivileged backgrounds do not get adequate nutrition and have very limited access to health services which reduces their capacity to work, to have healthy babies, and to lead moderately decent lives. They are also far behind in digital literacy and cannot afford smartphones in order to reap the benefits of connectivity.

These are only some of the areas that must be considered in policymaking that aims to stimulate gender equality which is an essential prerequisite of development.

It is women's incredible resilience, selflessness and innovative spirit that have contributed to Bangladesh's progress in many areas. In order to sustain this progress and make this nation strong, self-reliant and dynamic, much work needs to be done by the government and private sector to remove all kinds of discrimination and obstacles that prevent women from realising their full potential.

When lifts become death traps

Poor maintenance is the culprit

WE are appalled to learn about yet another lift accident that injured 14 people, this time at the Dhaka District and Sessions Judge Court. A report in this daily quotes an executive engineer of the public works ministry which is in charge of the lift, opining that the lift collapsed due to overload. But an advocate of the Dhaka Bar Association has said that he had been telling the authorities of the court for a long time about the poor condition of the lift but nothing had been done. It seems that the usual suspect behind such horrific accidents is basically poor maintenance.

Thankfully, in this case, those trapped in the lift were rescued quickly by fire fighters and locals. But there have been many instances when such accidents have taken precious lives. Last March, seven-year-old Alvira was killed in a horrendous lift accident when the gates of the lift of the building she lived in slammed on her. In 2016, four people were killed and 20 injured when a lift crashed in the basement of an Uttara mall causing an explosion and fire. Experts have said that these crashes often are due to lack of routine maintenance and safety inspection by qualified professionals. This seems to be true of many other public and private buildings – both commercial and residential Thursday's accident and many others preceding it have proven how dangerous such a blasé attitude towards safety can be.

According to experts, there should be monthly maintenance and thorough inspection every six months to see if there are any faults such as loosening of the pulling cable, malfunction of the control system, sensors and motor of the lift. We urge the government to make it mandatory for all buildings with lifts to be inspected and maintained by the authorities in charge. It is unacceptable that lives will be endangered because of such gross negligence.

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

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Keep our footpaths clean

The other day, while passing the Nabisco intersection, Tejgaon, I noticed that garment waste and other garbage were dumped on the footpath on the opposite side of the road. This spot has long been used as a local dumpsite. How are pedestrians supposed to walk on footpaths when waste is indiscriminately dumped like this? No wonder many pedestrians end up jaywalking, essentially endangering their lives, simply because there is no space for them to walk. There are various other repercussions including health issues. I would like to request the local authorities to keep the footpaths clean.

Shafayet, by email

The untapped potential of women in water resource management

JYOTIRAJ PATRA

THE International Women's Day (IWD) has been observed this year with a call to build a gender-balanced world. The day is an occasion to celebrate the social, economic, cultural, and political achievements of women. It also marks a call to action to accelerate gender parity, with a campaign slogan of #BalanceforBetter. The world now needs a balanced gender spectrum which addresses not only "women's issues" but an approach that involves policymakers, community leaders, religious leaders, media, and various professionals—both women and men.

While women are making progress in many sectors and taking leadership roles, in terms of water resources and rights, they still lack a major voice. Women play a critical role in providing, managing, and safeguarding water resources and yet their participation in water governance is not visible. Poor understanding of the distinct roles and contributions of men and women often leads to a lack of recognition of their needs and interests in policies and programmes linked to water management. This lack of recognition can result in a failure to meet the global social, economic and ecological targets such as the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) 2030. On the other hand, interventions aimed at balancing gender relations in water-related domains can help in furthering gender equality more broadly.

Globally, pressure on water resources continues to grow as millions of people lack secure access to water due to growing competition over natural resources. This can be caused by infrastructure development, agricultural and industrial expansion, and effects of climate change. In South Asia alone, more than 700 million people live in river basin areas, many of whom dependent on water resources. Due to the increasing demand for water, their lives and livelihoods are adversely affected, causing poverty and injustice. This could well be managed with an inclusive and accountable water resource management structure within the country and foster cooperation at the regional level among governments. But the water governance system is not always inclusive of people's voices, especially the riverine communities, which are not always represented at the policy level.

Meanwhile, water resource governance has become a major development issue as the demand for water continues to increase. Governance efforts should consider who is involved, who is excluded, who benefits, and who loses when decisions are made about the development of river basin resources. Due to the absence of a participatory water resource

management system, we have observed that riverine people can be negatively impacted.

This scenario is further accentuated by women's exclusion from the process. Women often play a vital role in the livelihood systems of rural and riverine communities but are less likely to have access to information and decision-making processes. Women's role in water governance practices and structure is hindered by gender-related biases and they face constant challenges in acquiring economic resources. They are often disproportionately disadvantaged when water regimes change and their voices are the least heard in decision-making on water issues. To address this, several efforts have been made to put gender issues on the international water governance agenda,

norms and values that exclude women from public life, and lack of family support with respect to domestic responsibilities.

Women sustain life through their relationship with water. Women in many countries are often the primary users of water and if given the opportunity to lead, they can provide, manage, and safeguard water resources as they develop a set of unique knowledge about their ecosystems and biodiversity through their work in their homes, communities, and societies. From our experience in the Mekong river basin in South-East Asia, we have seen that when women are involved in decisions regarding the use of their resources, development benefits are more likely to be stronger, equally shared and sustainable.

Despite this, gender considerations are still seen as irrelevant in major decisions

movement. Oxfam and its partners are supporting women in the region so that they can build their capacity to help themselves as well as the poor and marginalised people to gain control over their own lives.

However, this is only the beginning of the journey and ending all forms of discriminations and inequalities against women and girls in the water sector would require addressing the power imbalances between women and men through an inclusive and participatory approach. In order to reach substantive equality, water governance regimes and institutions must take affirmative action and bear in mind that decisions about water allocation and access to services can either challenge or further worsen these inequalities. Targeted, committed and continual efforts are



PHOTO: STAR WEEKEND/DIN M SHIBLY

focusing on gender mainstreaming in the water sector within the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs). More recently, the Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 6 on water and sanitation also calls for special attention to gender equality. These policy efforts, however, do not adequately address the persistent disadvantages that women experience in transboundary river contexts, especially the effects of hydropower on fisheries and therefore on poverty and food security.

In South Asia, women are culturally less able to express their views. Deep inequalities persist from the household level to regional and national governance. There are other factors which further aggravate the situation such as low levels of education and experience, lack of self-confidence, religious and patriarchal

on large-scale water management issues like construction of dams and hydropower projects, river protection embankments, or water trade. Policy decisions are mostly devoid of women's participation and as a result, they are affected more than their male counterparts. It is imperative that women are given equal representation.

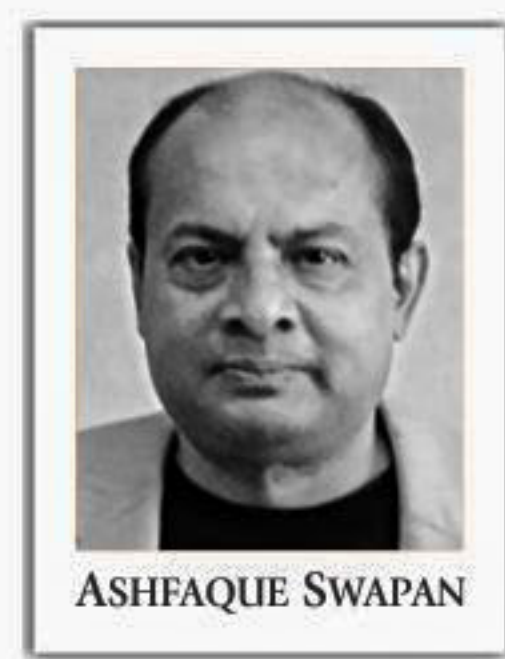
The good news is that despite being faced with all these odds, women in South and South East Asia are coming forward to address water governance issues and raising their voices to demand their water rights. We have been working on water governance and women's participation in the process in Asia since the early 2000s. What we have found through working with women is that if opportunities are created, women can stand up for their communities and become the voice of the

needed to create an enabling environment for women's participation and leadership in water governance. This includes addressing underlying causes of gender equality; increasing women's knowledge, skills and confidence to take a more active role in decision-making; and creating opportunities for women to participate and have their voices heard. Policy makers need to understand the needs of women with respect to the use of rivers and water resources and design and formulate policies and programmes that benefit women and men equally.

Jyotiraj Patra works with Oxfam's Transboundary Rivers of South Asia (TROSA). TROSA is a regional water governance programme working in the Ganges-Brahmaputra-Meghna (GBM) and Salween transboundary river basins. It is supported by the government of Sweden. The views expressed are personal.

The Trump Tamasha

Is his political mystique finally unravelling?



ASHFAQUR SWAPAN

suck to lose a popularity contest to Saddam Hussein?

Maher was referring to polls showing the US public's overwhelming disapproval of the erstwhile US president's disastrous Iraq war, waged on a false pretext of the presence of weapons of mass destruction. Despite widespread loathing for the Iraqi dictator of that time, Americans did not buy their president's argument for going to war. (Outrage was even greater among the global public.)

Well, give the devil its due. The current incumbent in the White House has gone one better than good old Dubya.

How badly do you have to suck when the American people trust you even less than a thug and fixer who lied to Congress?

That's exactly what has happened after a riveting, if sordid, drama played out in television for the edification of the US public in which Michael Cohen, a former fixer/thug of US President Donald J Trump, called the president a cheat, a conman and a racist.

A recent Quinnipiac poll found that respondents thought Cohen, a disbarred lawyer who pleaded to lying to Congress, was more trustworthy than Trump by a margin of 50 percent to 35 percent.

There's more. The poll showed 65 percent believe Trump is not honest, while 64 percent believe he committed crimes before becoming president (and 45 percent believe he's committed crimes in the White House).

No wonder former US Senate speaker Harry Reid, Democrat of Nevada, sounds positively wistful about George W Bush, with whom he had fought many a bitter

political battle. "I miss him every day," Reid said recently. "We had our political differences, but no one ever questioned his patriotism."

Things have come to such a pass that one waxes eloquent about George W Bush, whose dubious historical claim to fame includes two major debacles in recent US history: The Iraq war in foreign policy, and the ghastly management of the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina, from which the storied city of New Orleans has never quite recovered.

The Cohen hearings quickly descended into political fisticuffs with

among the party base Trump strides like a colossus, with a whopping 80 to 90 percent approval from Republicans.

Yet, at the same time, Trump's bare-knuckle partisanship is beginning to take a toll. The recent midterm thumping of Republicans has put Democrats back in power in the House, and the Cohen hearings has led to ominously widening House investigations into Trump.

A catastrophic nosedive in support for the Republican Party in America's wealthy suburbs led to their midterm electoral debacle. While it's too early to say how all this will play out in the 2020 presidential elections, one political



US President Donald Trump.

PHOTO: REUTERS/JOSHUA ROBERTS

the feel of a WWE professional wrestling brawl, thanks to Republican antagonists' bitter, if unconvincing, tirade against giving a platform to a confessed liar.

What's striking is what Republicans did not do. Not a single one of them defended Trump. Even Trump's staunchest House supporters aren't willing to be a character witness for Trump.

How is all of this going to play out? You have to remember that today's toxic political polarisation has made US national politics viciously tribal. While his Republican Party got a smart kick on its backside in the recent midterm polls,

scientist says it may not matter, because Trump's eventual loss may already be baked in.

"The high levels of hyperpartisanship and polarisation in the electorate have... made the outcome of our elections highly predictable," Rachel Bitecofer wrote recently in the *New York Times*. A key aspect of this is negative partisanship, she says. Voters are driven more by hatred of the opposition party. This benefits the party that doesn't hold the presidency.

Bitecofer, a professor at the Wason Center for Public Policy at Christopher Newport University in Virginia, used her

political model to predict the midterm elections months before other analysts, and her predictions held up well against the very best.

Remember, Trump won by a whisker in 2016, thanks to the antiquated US electoral college system. Candidates win electoral college votes allocated to each state by winning individual states.

The size of the majority in each state does not matter. This led to a bizarre situation where Trump beat Democratic candidate Hillary Clinton despite losing the popular vote by over 2.8 million votes.

How is this possible? Here's an example. While Hillary won the same number of 52 electoral college votes from California despite beating Trump by over 4 million votes, Trump squeaked home to victory by winning the 46 combined electoral college votes of Michigan, Wisconsin and Pennsylvania by whisker-thin majorities. His total majority in all three states combined was 107,000, enough to fit a football field.

This time it's different. "It is not likely he will carry Michigan, Wisconsin and Pennsylvania in 2020," Bitecofer says. Democrats trounced Republicans in these states in the recent midterms.

This gives me some hope at a depressing time when the US political system seems to be in meltdown mode with a hatemongering chronic liar for a president and a Republican Party held in complete thrall with no qualms about enabling him.

But a caveat is in order. Trump has defied analysts before.

I draw hope from the words of a president from a very different Republican Party. "You can fool some of the people all of the time, you can fool all of the people some of the time, but you cannot fool all the people all the time," Abraham Lincoln, America's 16th president, is said to have observed.

Now historians doubt he ever said it. Be that as it may, I hope for the nation's sake that those words are true, whoever said it.

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