

# 'Women's right to make decisions is paramount'

*Harry Verweij, the ambassador of the Kingdom of the Netherlands to Bangladesh, talks to The Daily Star's Md Shahnawaz Khan Chandan about Bangladesh's progress on women's empowerment and the Netherlands' role in this regard.*

Cooperation between Bangladesh and the Netherlands in different sectors goes back over half a century. This year, the Netherlands will celebrate 100 years of women's suffrage while Bangladesh will celebrate its 50 years of independence in a few years. Against this backdrop, how do you see women's empowerment in your country and in Bangladesh?

Bangladesh and the Netherlands can learn a lot from each other. Men and women are close to equal in almost all parts of the Netherlands. However, in terms of women in important positions, we still have some progress to make. In this regard, Bangladesh's female prime ministers are exemplary cases of women's empowerment.

The women of the Netherlands played a significant role in the industrialisation of our country. During the Second World War, our economy was devastated. After that we completely redeveloped our economy. With landmass one fifth of Bangladesh and with only 17 million people, we are now the second largest agricultural exporter in the world after the United States. We are the 17th largest economy in the world. This wouldn't have been possible without innovation, quality education for all, and an open, inclusive economy. We have given the same quality of education to all and we have given all citizens, men and women, equal opportunity to apply their knowledge and skills.

I really applaud Bangladesh for its achievements in gender equality in the past 20 years. It has achieved incredible progress in female education. There are institutions in Bangladesh which have been focusing on developing women entrepreneurs. Bangladeshi women entrepreneurs are doing an amazing job which I saw first-hand during my six months in the country. They are creative and forceful, cutting through the



Harry Verweij

PHOTO: PRABIR DAS

red tape and doing a lot of good things. Bangladesh has really progressed a lot in terms of creating more opportunities for women.

What are the key initiatives undertaken by the Embassy of the Kingdom of the Netherlands (EKN) to empower women in Bangladesh? How has the government of Bangladesh been facilitating this?

We have always considered the government of Bangladesh to be a partner. We work within the policy framework of the government to ensure sustainability of our programmes. We have been working with the government on several gender and sexual and reproductive health and rights (SRHR) programmes. We found the government to be extremely cooperative in this regard. In fact, it is quite courageous of the Bangladesh government to work extensively on several

delicate issues such as SRHR, equal rights of women in their families, prevention of AIDS in conservative rural areas, etc.

With government support, we have also been engaging the private sector with our programmes. A project like Working with Women by SNV introduces inclusive business solutions to ensure health and SRHR of garment workers. In our projects like IMAGE, SHOKHI, we do not only work with girls or women, we also work with their in-laws, male members of the families and young unmarried people to ensure that women can have a safe environment. We are working hard to prevent child marriage. Many women have become financially empowered; many of them attended our education and health programmes. But our most significant achievement is helping to create a general sense of awareness among family members, among the women themselves. And these women have become the ambassadors of women's rights in their own communities.

Bangladesh has been acclaimed internationally for its progress on several gender indicators. How would you evaluate these achievements? What are the major challenges for Bangladesh to achieving its goals?

Since its independence, Bangladesh has gone through a lot of significant changes. However, the nature of this change is different in lower income groups compared to the upper- and middle-income segments of society. If I start with the latter, there have been lots of positive improvements such as the increase in women's participation in education, rise of women entrepreneurship, women's participation in politics, in the job market, etc. On the other hand, in the lower-income segment, there have been both positive and negative developments. The positive development is that many women

from the lower-income families have become the backbone of Bangladesh's economy as many of them work in the RMG sector. They have become slightly more independent than before. They have a job. They can look after their families, their children, and can ensure their education. These are signs of positive developments.

If you characterise these changes, however, you'll see that these are more individual developments, not completely policy-supported. At the same time, there are certain social cohesion issues in Bangladesh which still have not been adequately dealt with. Although these employed women are providing for their families, they are not always fully free in making their own choices. One of the major challenges is to ensure that these women are independent, that they can live as an equal partner in the society and can decide their own future. I often say that when a country's economy is at the tipping point, as Bangladesh's economy currently is, it can tip over to the positive side or the negative side. To push the economy towards the positive side, women need to be given equal space and their right to make decisions is paramount. And, the society needs to make sure that it is ready to accept this development.

How do you see Bangladesh's progress towards eliminating gender-based violence?

Increasing instances of violence against women is an extremely serious issue for Bangladesh. I know a statistic that more than 80 percent of married women encountered violence by their intimate partners at least once in their lives (ICDDR,B). Actually, there are different forms of violence against women. Rape, being the most horrific form, should be radically prosecuted. Otherwise it will provide safe space for the perpetrators. Again, other forms of violence such as

psychological violence, financial violence and violence against children should also be addressed simultaneously. Domestic violence should be addressed rigorously. In this regard, men should also be included in the programmes developed to address these malpractices. Still men are the decision-makers in most of the families in Bangladesh. This is why it is critical to change men's attitude to women's rights and role in the families.

The ready-made garment (RMG) industry is Bangladesh's largest export sector and the Netherlands is one of its biggest buyers. The vast majority of RMG workers in Bangladesh are women. How is the Netherlands supporting this large group of women?

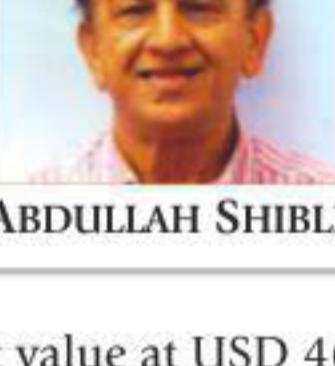
I think we have been one of the most important and active partners of Bangladesh when it comes to the country's RMG sector. Since the Rana Plaza disaster in 2013, we have been working closely with the Bangladesh government, not to criticise them, not to impose our policies on them, but really to help find rational and feasible solutions. The Accord, which is the agreement between the unions, brands and the producers, has worked tremendously to improve workplace safety in the RMG sector. And many Bangladeshi factories have reached European standards in terms of workplace safety.

However, still we are far from reaching our ultimate goal where all the RMG factories in the country will be able to guarantee complete safety to its workers. This is an ongoing discussion and we are at the forefront on this matter. We should also focus on other aspects of workers' rights such as wage gaps, sustainable sourcing and pricing of the RMG products and workers' right to express themselves freely.

## Facebook, please change your business model!



AN OPEN DIALOGUE



**F**ACEBOOK is one of the largest technology companies in the world. However, the year 2018 was not the best one for Facebook, although its revenue jumped by 38 percent to USD 55 billion last year, boosting its market value at USD 462 billion. The problem is how Facebook collects information on its users and then goes about sharing it with paying customers. Facebook has repeatedly found itself in trouble last year for its practices which are now known to be "spying and lying".

The state of New York is now bearing down on Facebook and investigating the company on different aspects of its business dealings. This follows a news report that eleven companies regularly send personal health information data about users of apps on Facebook. For example, six of the top 15 health-and-fitness apps in Apple's App Store were sending personal data to Facebook. New York Governor Andrew Cuomo described the data sharing arrangement between Facebook and the app companies as "an outrageous abuse of privacy".

Last year, Facebook's CEO Mark Zuckerberg was called before the US Congress to explain its failures during the 2016 US presidential election and for "selling ads to Russian propagandists and allowing fake news to flourish on the platform." While he promised to make serious efforts to protect user data, make Facebook's advertising and marketing policies more transparent, and prevent bad actors from using the platform to spread misinformation in the future, the social media giant is in trouble again. A user group has filed a complaint recently with the Federal Trade Commission for providing "misleading information on privacy policies to con-

vince people to give out personal health information." In other words, Facebook lied to users who joined a patient support group with the assurance that it would keep personal and health information safe, secure, and confidential, and then sold the information to external entities who used the information to sell products to this vulnerable group. Once it became aware, Facebook then allegedly failed to report breaches of that data and ignored requests to fix the problem.

Ironically, only a month ago, Zuckerberg wrote an op-ed in the Wall Street Journal (WSJ) to reassure the American public that its business practices are above board. In a piece entitled "The Facts About Facebook" published on January 24, 2019, he declared, "We need your information for operation and security, but you control whether we use it for advertising." And that is a blatant lie!

Readers using Facebook are aware that when you sign up for a Facebook account, you're required to share name, gender, date of birth, and email or mobile number. After you join, Facebook gathers and stores more personal data, what you share and add, and your likes and clicks which can be used to target you with ads. Facebook also tracks and stores data about the ads you check out, personal information you add to your profile including schools, maiden name, hometown and current city, employment, other social networks like political clubs, groups, and alumni associations, each IP address you login from...and much, much more. WSJ found that popular apps were using Facebook's software development kit or SDK to send the social network "intensely personal data".

In light of these revelations, New York's regulator (Financial Services Department) is ramping up its investigation of how Facebook gathered sensitive personal information from popular smartphone applications after the discovery that health and fitness apps were sending the social-media giant data, includ-



PHOTO: REUTERS/DADO RUVIC

Figurines are seen in front of the Facebook logo in this illustration taken March 20, 2018.

ing users' body weight and menstrual cycles.

And we all know what it does with it! It sells the information it collects from its users to the 7 million paying advertisers, "who are Facebook's actual customers", according to WSJ's Laura Forman. The bulk of Facebook's revenue, actually 85 percent, is derived from digital advertising. Unfortunately, the business model is based on archiving user data or "history" which can be used to direct commercials, information, and promotions to a "target audience". According to Forman, Facebook is now struggling to fine-tune this business model in light of the "sea of privacy issues that haunted Facebook in 2018".

Facebook's Chief Operating Officer Sheryl Sandberg promised on February 26 at an investor conference that the company will address privacy concerns and find a balance between monetising personal information and protecting privacy. "Targeted advertising and privacy

are not at odds", she said. Zuckerberg has repeatedly defended Facebook's use of the data and postings of the 2.2 billion users of its platform in the face of accusations that it was sharing users' personal messages with large technology companies like Netflix and Spotify without their permission even after it tightened its privacy rules in 2014-15. Facebook has denied this allegation.

Unlike the US, many other countries have already tightened their privacy and personal data protection rules. The European Union passed the General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR) on May 25, 2018. This new law requires the three million European businesses that advertise on Facebook—and "offer goods or services to, or monitor the behaviour of, EU data subjects"—to be more transparent regarding the kinds of personal data they collect and what they do with it.

Furthermore, GDPR requires that users or

"prospects must give their expressed consent in order for you to harvest and utilize that data. No tomfoolery. No shenanigans. Only the utmost transparency," Allen Finn warns on The WordStream Blog.

On February 28, Ireland's privacy regulator, the Data Protection Commission, said that it opened 10 investigations into whether Facebook or its subsidiaries violated GDPR. India is borrowing a page from China's books and its "National Champion" policy will unveil efforts to further tighten restrictions on Amazon.com Inc., Walmart Inc. Facebook Inc. and other foreign firms that have come to dominate the country's budding internet economy, according to Fortune magazine.

What lesson should Facebook draw from its troubles? Jessica Powell, an author and former vice president at Google, advises that Facebook needs to learn from the experience of big oil, chemical manufacturers, tobacco companies, and politicians. "It is a company, and like most companies, driven first and foremost by profit. The good companies are the ones who acknowledge this but are equally aware of their responsibility and their need to act ethically and with transparency. The bad companies are the ones who believe they are something else—who tell themselves and the world that they are one thing, when in fact they are something very different."

For users of Facebook, my advice is: check the privacy settings for each of the popular social media apps you use, and the user groups you belong to. Ask what information these groups share! And remember, whether you live in Bangladesh or China, this is an age of what Shoshana Zuboff calls "surveillance capitalism". This new global architecture works with interlinked enterprises to affect, and profit from, behaviour modification in the twenty-first century.

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### CROSSWORD BY THOMAS JOSEPH

**ACROSS**  
 1 Put in the hold  
 5 Weasel's cousin  
 10 School on the Thames  
 11 Tasks  
 13 Watch over  
 14 Acting company  
 15 Aquatic mammal  
 17 Opposite of post-  
 18 Spring forth  
 19 Light metal  
 20 Navigation aid: Abbr.  
 21 Nuisance  
 22 Merchandise  
 25 YouTube upload  
 26 From the U.S.  
 27 Stake  
**DOWN**  
 1 Door holder's words  
 2 Group of top players  
 3 Summer of song  
 4 Put in peril  
 5 Big singing groups  
 6 First odd prime  
 7 Overly  
 8 Blew one's top  
 9 Musical repeat  
 12 Looked after  
 16 Lights-out song  
 21 Meager payment  
 22 Stakes  
 23 Charms  
 24 Eviction  
 25 Schnitzel meat  
 27 Isn't colorfast  
 29 Showy bird  
 30 Naples's nation  
 31 Gunpowder  
 32 Ageless dwarf  
 36 Historic time

