

When the monsters came out of the closet

Will this epidemic of child rape ever end?



IQRA L. QAMARI

IT is the eve of Eid-ul-Azha. A little girl goes to a neighbour's house to apply mehendi on her hands. A skip in her step. Innocence playing in her eyes. Cut to the next scene, and her hands are not being adorned by henna but are rather being tied with rope by two men. She struggles with their rough, overpowering hands and as she is about to scream, they gag her with a strip of cloth and mercilessly gang-rape her. She watches in horror, appalled and powerless.

As much as I would have liked the above extract to have been derived from a fictitious and tragic novel, this is the reality a 12-year-old girl from Bhola had to live with on the day before Eid. She fell prey to this monstrous duo who lured her into their apartment under the pretext of giving her mehendi and then subjected her to this terror. And all we know now is that she is just another victim of the staggering 471 cases of child rape from the first half of 2019 alone—according to Child Rights Advocacy Coalition (CRAC)—and that she is in DMCH, bleeding intermittently. The story then gets more twisted. The alleged rapists, within the next few days, were killed in a "gunfight" with the police who intended to arrest them.

Incidents like these can leave

families reeling from remorse, rage, an utter sense of failure as a protector and a feeling of diminution. Family members of rape victims are the secondary victims of the inflicted assault. The ripple effects of such a violation can be tremulous for the very familial foundation. Studies have exhibited how the "non-perpetrator family members" may feel isolated and estranged from others. I use the term "non-perpetrator" because in this social narrative, the extent to which family members themselves are perpetrators is sickening.

In our local climate—in which communities are an integral part, especially in rural settings—when a member gets raped, the family is relegated to a lower position in the social ladder. In this particular case, the family is having to deal with being threatened as well. The brother of one of the rapists has cautioned them against his vengeful intentions.

As much as we can pray that it was an empty threat, we have lost even that hope in another shocking incident that occurred while writing this article—another young girl was assaulted by three men after they failed to coerce her family into withdrawing a rape-attempt case they had filed earlier against the offenders, despite several threats. Even with a lawsuit already lodged in court, the men broke into their house, tied up the mother, abducted the girl and left her bleeding by the bank of a river after gang raping her. The police have been able to arrest only one culprit while the others are at large. There is an abnormal unity among these sexual

predators, whose intentions intersect into synchronised acts of brutality. It is hard to grasp the degree of audacity they carry that prevents them from reconsidering their actions in the face of law, but given our prevailing culture of impunity, procedural obstacles, frightfully low conviction rates of sex offenders and the miscarriage of our morals, perhaps it is not that hard to fathom why these criminals will not shudder at the thought of the repercussions of their actions. Recent episodes of barbarity—in which the OC of Gaibandha, along with other cops, allegedly raped a woman—fortifies our worst fears. Thinking these offenders fall within a certain bracket would be looking at the situation through a distorted lens. These vile creatures that roam around under the facade of normalcy and perfectly functioning human beings do

not have any revelatory characteristics. They are the dotting uncle, the friendly neighbour, the righteous madrasa Imam, a harmless tea-seller or a member of the law enforcer itself. Given the spate of rape cases these days, one hardly gets to recover from one grotesque incident when another joins the news cycle. These are innocent children we are talking about here—who are falling prey to paedophiles. The usual mindless arguments that project the blame on the victim for wearing revealing clothes, or displaying indecent character traits, or simply being in the wrong place at the wrong time do not even apply here.

Experts have claimed that these criminals lurk within the shadows of society, moving from one victim to another until they get exposed or caught. But by the time they are captured, who knows how many

innocent lives they had already violated? According to Bangladesh Shishu Adhikar Forum (BSAF), hundreds of cases go unreported which propels the state of affairs to malfunction even more. Fearing ostracization or mass humiliation in front of their community, many of the families hush up the matter. In most cases, the victims barely have access to support groups, or therapy sessions for rehabilitation and so the role played by the surrounding community becomes very pivotal here. Orthodox beliefs of victim-blaming, of how a girl's reputation gets tarnished once assaulted have to be challenged so that we can foster a practice of standing by the victims and their families and learn to applaud the valiant resistance they show against such monstrosity. Also let us not forget that male children are also vulnerable to paedophiles.

The indifference of the legal system and law enforcement agencies towards child sexual abuse is a reflection of the society's denial of the pervasiveness of these crimes and general trivialisation of sexual violence. The wheels of justice are coming to a staggering stop due to our nonchalance and negligence and only a reform in our collective attitude can get them turning again. It is indeed repulsive that the honour of a girl is placed in her genitals by the society and once violated, she along with her family, get diminished to something disgraceful. The shame, after all, is for the culprits to carry, not the victims.

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Why can't dynamic Asia-Pacific beat poverty?

SHUVOJIT BANERJEE and POH LYNN NG

ASIA and the Pacific is lauded globally for its rapid economic growth over recent decades and has lifted 1.1 billion people out of extreme poverty since 1990. Nevertheless, the region continues to have the largest number of poor people in the world.

Why is Asia and the Pacific's economic progress not translating into faster poverty reduction?

The UN's recently released "World Economic Situation and Prospects mid-2019" report finds that the overall economic growth outlook for the Asia-Pacific region remains strong compared to other developing regions. Nevertheless, the report downgraded the growth projections for 2019 across most developed and developing regions, while warning of significant downside risks to the regional outlook.

The new round of tariff hikes and retaliations could exacerbate the continuing weaknesses in trade volumes and disrupt regional production networks. Meanwhile, elevated household and corporate debt in parts of East Asia are posing risks to financial stability.

Most worryingly, the region remains far from achieving a decent life for all its people. High economic growth has not translated into sufficient reduction in poverty in many countries, and the rising risks to growth over the coming years will only exacerbate the challenge.

The region has an estimated 400 million people living in extreme poverty below the threshold of USD 1.90 a day. At the higher international poverty line of USD 3.20 a day, the number of poor rises to 1.2 billion, accounting for more than a quarter of the region's total population.

Beyond monetary measures, indicators of multidimensional aspects of poverty paint an even bleaker picture.



Managing the cross-cutting challenges related to urban poverty will require improved urban planning and better policy coordination between national and local authorities.

PHOTO: ESCAP

In many parts of the region, most notably in South and South-West Asia, a large share of the population still lacks access to basic infrastructure and services. As poor households are constrained in their ability to receive nutrition, schooling and healthcare for their children, this is greatly dampening progress on human capital development and productivity growth, both of which are critical imperatives for sustainable development.

Managing rapid urbanisation is also necessary to tackle the challenge of growing urban poverty in many Asia-Pacific economies. More than half of the region's population now live in urban areas—and this share is expected to rise to two-thirds by 2050.

Keeping in view the ambitions

of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, how do we leave no one behind in the Asia-Pacific region? ESCAP's recently published "Asia and the Pacific SDG Progress Report 2019" stressed that economic growth alone is not sufficient for poverty reduction. What matters is the types of investment by governments.

Countries that have driven poverty reduction trends have focused their investments on people, importantly through the provision of health, education and social protection. Good examples in the region include Timor-Leste, Mongolia, Vietnam, Papua New Guinea and Bhutan.

How much would all these investments cost? ESCAP's most recent Economic and Social Survey of Asia

and the Pacific provides comprehensive estimates of investments required to achieve the SDGs in the region. The report focused on two aspects of investments in people: providing basic human rights (no poverty and zero hunger—SDGs 1 and 2) and building human capabilities (health and education for all—SDGs 3 and 4).

To eliminate poverty, policy interventions include cash transfers based on national poverty lines and establishing a social protection floor. Interventions for hunger include nutrition-specific investments and rural investments.

To build human capacities, the estimates include the cost of providing health infrastructure and the cost of universal pre-primary to upper-

secondary schooling. The report finds that the total spending required to achieve these goals is well within reach for many governments. Specifically, the cost of eliminating poverty and hunger and achieving health and education for all amounts to USD 669 billion per year on average, or less than 2 percent of average GDP of developing countries in the region between 2016-2030.

For countries that are unable to meet the costs on their own, particularly the least developed countries (LDCs) where the estimated costs reach 12 percent of GDP, assistance from the international community will be crucial.

What are some of the key policy imperatives? First, the social protection floor should account for the largest share of required investments, as it has an enormous impact through protecting all age groups from poverty.

Second, countries with the highest success rates of reducing poverty through social protection have designed and implemented universal programmes instead of poverty-targeting ones. These countries include Georgia, Kyrgyzstan, Mongolia, Nepal and Uzbekistan.

Finally, managing the cross-cutting challenges related to urban poverty will require improved urban planning and better policy coordination between national and local authorities. Two cities exhibiting such approaches, with policy support from ESCAP, are Da Nang in Vietnam and Naga in the Philippines.

As governments in the region strive towards eliminating poverty by 2030, people-centred investments will be the key towards improving the livelihoods of the marginalised and disadvantaged segments of society.

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ON THIS DAY IN HISTORY

August 24, 1932
Amelia Earhart becomes the first woman to fly across the US non-stop

Amelia Earhart embarked on the first successful coast-to-coast flight for a woman. The trip, from Los Angeles, CA to Newark, NJ, took her a record of 19 hours and five minutes

CROSSWORD BY THOMAS JOSEPH

ACROSS

- 30 Party worker
- 31 One, for Juan
- 32 Museum focus
- 33 Digestion aid
- 35 Map ratio
- 38 Lugs
- 39 Drying need
- 40 Conspicuous
- 41 Sailing hazards
- 42 Takes ten

DOWN

- 1 Turns red, perhaps
- 2 Maine park
- 3 Egotist's offense
- 4 Throw off
- 5 Room designer
- 6 Lingerie item
- 7 Was ahead
- 8 Change over time
- 9 Network show
- 10 Some coasters
- 16 Job seeker's copies
- 20 Bolivar, for one
- 21 Passport, license, etc.
- 24 That woman
- 25 Call in a bistro
- 26 Northern capital
- 27 Orchestra pieces
- 28 Flop
- 29 Wedding reception events
- 30 Play groups
- 34 Valentino word
- 36 Relay section
- 37 Golfer Ernie

YESTERDAY'S ANSWERS

C	O	P	E	S	W	A	T	T	S
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