

Why are secondary school students suffering?

Teachers of main subjects do not have proper training

ACCORDING to the Education Watch Report 2018-2019, which is prepared by Campaign for Popular Education (CAMPE), 55 percent of English and mathematics teachers in secondary schools have not been specifically trained to teach these two important subjects. The situation is worse with teachers who teach physics (75 percent), chemistry (78 percent) and general science (64 percent). Consequently, these teachers fail to give proper instruction to students and must compensate for their lack of knowledge by relying on "guidebooks" to teach students in the classroom.

Astonishing as it may sound, these commercial guidebooks are basically replacing government-approved textbooks because the answers to questions are provided therein. Which basically means that an untrained teacher does not have to put in too much effort and students do not need to solve problems. We have reached a stage where students merely need to memorise the problems and solutions and then appear in school examinations. Things naturally go awry if those sets of questions do not appear in the school examination question papers! Regardless of how appalling it sounds, the fact that this situation has been allowed to deteriorate to this level is a failure of the authorities to provide teachers with training and take on the powerful syndicate of businessmen who control the "guidebook" trade.

Without quality education, the children will fail to do well in higher tiers of education. We cannot expect good graduates coming out of higher seats of learning if they are taught to memorise instead of how to analyse problems at school level. It is time for the concerned ministry to take a hard look at where its budgetary allocation is going. There is no point in churning out millions of students from secondary education because most of them will be handicapped by their lack of analytical skills. Today, we have millions of university graduates who are unemployed in the country because, among other things, they lack the skills demanded by the job industry. Now we know why.

Why foil a peaceful rally?

Uncalled-for interruptions by the police should stop

THE police foiling a "civic mourning rally" brought out by Jatiya Oikyafront to protest the murder of Buet student Abrar Fahad is disturbing. According to news reports, police intercepted the rally minutes after it started from Jatiya Press Club, led by Jatiya Oikyafront convener Dr Kamal Hossain. Earlier, on October 12, police chased a rally brought out by BNP to protest the recent deals that Bangladesh signed with India and the murder of Abrar. According to reports, police not only disrupted the rally but also detained over 100 leaders and activists of the party.

These interventions by the police are uncalled-for and unacceptable. Both the rallies had been peaceful where the organisers were practicing their democratic right to freedom of expression. Are people not allowed to express their feelings in a peaceful manner? Where is the space for the freedom of expression and freedom of assembly that the constitution guarantees?

The law enforcement agencies must realise that the protests that are being organised are for a just cause—to demand punishment of Abrar's killers; these protests and rallies are also spaces where people can mourn this unacceptable murder. Obstruction of peaceful protests and interruption by the police must be stopped. If anything, the police should facilitate these peaceful activities. It is important to provide the people with the space where they can express their grief and their frustration. In a democracy, these rights should be exercised without being impeded by the law enforcement agencies.

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

letters@thedailystar.net

Student politics and ragging

Most of the students who are into politics tend to focus less on studies, and are busy with political campaigns. In the process, they cause harm to many other fellow students. But how many of those students become successful as independent human beings securing bright future for themselves, remains a question.

Many students are so invested in their political endeavours that they barely focus on their studies, which should be their prime concern. Hence, I believe that student politics should be eliminated from educational institutions across the nation. Only then will the students be able to study with ease.

Another major obstacle to education is the ragging culture. The victims are shamed in various manners. The humiliation has serious psychological and often physical consequences on many of the students. It is shocking that such a culture is practiced across our educational institutions. Such disturbing acts must come to an end immediately so that students can focus on education and build a brighter future for themselves as well as the nation.

Rakib Hasan Roky
Founder and Director, Poor Redemption Foundation



SHAHEEN ANAM

She is the Rural Woman of Bangladesh. In spite of all the gains women have made, rural women lag behind in every indicator of human development.

October 15 is the UN's International Day of Rural Women. The first Rural Women Day was observed on October 15, 2008 after a General Assembly resolution on December 18, 2007, in recognition of "the critical role and contribution of rural women in promoting agricultural and rural development, improving food security and eradicating rural poverty." This year's theme for the day is "Rural women and girls building climate resilience" as an outcome of the UN Climate Action Summit. The theme is significant given the challenges and impending crisis of climate change, and it reminds us that a sustainable future for the world is not possible without the contributions of rural women and girls.

The Rural Women Day is celebrated to recognise their contribution in all its dimensions, evaluate their work and give them the honour and dignity that they rightly deserve.

Globally, the scenario of rural women is not encouraging. Women produce 60-80 percent of basic foodstuffs in sub-Saharan Africa and the Caribbean and are involved in over 50 percent of the labour in intensive rice cultivation in Asia. They head 60 percent of households in many regions. They carry 80 percent of household water. In spite of these figures, 500 million women in the world live below the poverty line in rural areas.

In Bangladesh, women's participation in agriculture has grown exponentially during the past 15 years. Rural women play a vital role in a wide range of income-generating activities through agriculture, which include post-harvesting, cow fattening and milking, goat farming, poultry rearing, etc. Women also play a key role in home gardening and vegetable growing. Over and above their domestic work, rural women have always played an active role in ensuring household food security. They not only ensure the protein supply of the family by rearing livestock or poultry, but also contribute to household diet by growing various vegetables and fruits in

homestead gardens. Farm activities in the homesteads, ranging from selection of seed to harvesting and storing of crops, are predominantly managed by women. According to an estimate, women contribute 25-50 percent of household income in rural families.

Unfortunately, there is yet to be a formal recognition of rural women's work or economic contribution. Efforts by a number of organisations to bring all of women's unpaid work, which is both productive and reproductive, into national accounting have not been successful so far. The System of National Accounts (SNA) does not allow for non-market products to be counted and included into the GDP. However, this work is ongoing. Policy advocacy, mobilisation followed

the total damage and loss resulting from climate-related disasters from 2006 to 2016 was faced by the agricultural sector in developing countries, and this significantly impacted rural women and girls' food security and productive potential. Women are more likely to die during most climate-related disasters and face greater constraints in accessing natural resources like land and water. Climate change exacerbates existing inequalities, potentially leaving rural women and girls further behind.

One of the most effective ways to achieve progress on the threats posed by climate change is to address gender inequality. Research shows that empowered women with decision-making ability have greater capacity to respond to

fewer options for women living in rural areas to take advantage of technologies, income opportunities, employment, etc. However, rural women have come far in entrepreneurship and there has been a huge expansion in home-based work and SME's through microcredit and relaxed public lending opportunities.

Most importantly, the contribution of rural women should be given formal recognition through proper evaluation and policy support, including a budget allocation for the care economy; plus, a system needs to be devised to monetise their work and include it in national accounting. However, what's most important is the recognition of the role that rural women play in our lives, of holding the fabric of our society together,



Rural women at work.

PHOTO: SK ENAMUL HAQ

up by well-researched empirical evidence will hopefully convince the policymakers to take note of this anomaly and devise a system that will accord formal recognition to the contribution of rural women.

Besides agriculture and unpaid care work, rural women and girls play a vital role in land and natural resource management. Women also collect biomass fuels, manually process foodstuffs, and pump water; 80 percent of households without piped water rely on women and girls for water collection. There is no doubt that rural women are at the forefront of the battle when natural resources and agriculture are threatened. For example, a quarter of

climate change; they play important roles in adopting low-carbon technologies, spreading knowledge about climate change, and urging action. Adopting gender-responsive climate policies and programmes and promoting women's leadership in climate action are thus key to reducing the harmful effects of global warming.

In the last 20 years, women in Bangladesh have made huge progress in terms of economic, social and political empowerment. However, it must be remembered that women are not a homogenous group. There are differences in terms of class, ethnicity, and level of education. And of course, there are

of providing love and care to the family, of keeping the kitchen stove burning and putting food on the table, no matter how little resources are available. It is in this context that Sir Fazle Hasan Abed has said, "women of Bangladesh are the best managers in the world as they manage poverty."

On this International Day of Rural Women, we salute them for their unfailing loyalty and commitment to family and society. Let us come forward together and give them the honour and dignity they rightly deserve.

Shaheen Anam is Executive Director, Manusher Jonno Foundation.

The growing maturity of RTI use in Bangladesh

SHAMSUL BARI and RUHI NAZ

LAST month, the International Right to Know Day was an occasion for the champions of the Right to Information (RTI) Act in Bangladesh to show how the law helps to strengthen democracy and advance good governance.

Unlike earlier years, the discussions and exchanges this year were more upbeat and hopeful about the future of the law in the country. Despite the hurdles citizens face to use the law, many have been motivated by the painstaking efforts of NGOs to do so to address and redress issues of public concern. Users include people from low-income groups and the educated middle class. There is a noticeable change from the earlier practice of using the law primarily for private needs to invoking it for larger issues of public interest.

From among many examples cited in public discussions and included in reports and publications for the occasion, we have chosen a few to elucidate the development. They demonstrate the growing maturity of the users in invoking the law and the relative increase in the willingness of the authorities to respond.

Some of the most inspiring stories are contained in a publication titled "Magic Happens When Women Carry the RTI Torch." An NGO called Management and Resource Development Initiative (MRDI) sensitised a group of young women from low-income backgrounds on the RTI law. They managed to hold to account various government agencies responsible for delivering social services to citizens. Their efforts contributed to changes in the way public officials relate to ordinary citizens and improved the quality of services delivered to people in their neighbourhoods. In the process, they had to deal with high officials and face hearings at the Information Commission, which are no mean feat. They have been rightly called brave change-makers of their communities.

Rabia Khatun Shorna is one such change-maker who lives in a low-income neighbourhood of Dhaka. She used RTI to address a variety of issues including prevention of sexual harassment that women face in public places and missing manhole covers in her neighbourhood. She turned them into subjects of RTI applications sent to the relevant authorities.

Shorna's major gripe was against inappropriate behaviours she faced every day on public transportation, including indecent comments about her body, or even groping by fellow passengers. She knew it was a common experience of most women and wanted to use RTI to fight it. Shorna filed an RTI application with

Khilgaon Police Station. As she did not get a response, she filed another application with the Ministry of Women and Children Affairs. She asked what they did to protect women in public transportation, since the general welfare of women fell under their responsibility.

When the ministry did not respond, she filed a complaint with the Information Commission. While waiting for a hearing by the Commission, she filed another application on the same issue to the Bangladesh Road Transport Authority (BRTA), responsible for public bus services. She asked what the BRTA did about sexual harassment on public transportation and how many complaints it had received and what actions had been taken to address them.

This time she got an answer. The BRTA

her streets were repaired and even elevated by a few inches so that rickshaws no longer tripped over them. The examples illustrate the impediments citizens face in applying the law but also its tremendous efficacy, if pursued doggedly.

Another change-maker, Jhorna, used RTI persistently, ignoring rejections and insults, to force Dhaka South City Corporation to spray mosquito insecticide in her neighbourhood regularly. Beauty Akhter of Sonir Beel area filed a similar RTI request; her local authorities sent her a detailed list of names, areas, dates, times and types of insecticide they sprayed in her area. While she saw little action on the ground, she was happy that her application was heeded to and future action could be expected. Her faith in RTI has increased.



informed her that it had no statistics on complaints as none were filed. She did not doubt the veracity of the response because even though sexual harassment is rampant, women are normally reluctant to make formal complaints about them. She was, however, reassured to learn that the BRTA was training drivers to handle such situations. She is convinced that a greater use of RTI mechanism with unwavering determination will improve the situation.

Shorna got better results from her RTI intervention on missing manhole covers on the streets in her neighbourhood. They were either broken or missing, through which sewage would spill on to the streets during rain and on which rickshaws would trip. Initially, she received no help from the Dhaka South City Corporation, as it had not appointed the mandated information officer, and no one else was willing to accept her application. As a result, she complained to the Information Commission, which did the trick. Soon

Shorna found that the manhole covers on

The variety in the use of the law is equally encouraging. Lawyers of the Bangladesh Legal Aid and Services Trust (BLAST) used the law to find out the state of compliance of the High Court guidelines and subsequent Education Ministry circular on ending corporal and mental punishment on students in educational institutions. They submitted RTI requests to different field offices of the ministry and received responses indicating that while in many instances the guideline/circular was being duly followed, many shortfalls remained. However, assurances were given that the gaps would be filled immediately. More such RTI interventions by citizens to different public bodies can advance the implementation of similar government directives and policies.

The plight of Bangladeshi female domestic workers in the Middle Eastern countries was the subject of an RTI intervention by a journalist, Zakir Hossain, in North Bengal, who was

sensitised on RTI at a training session jointly conducted by the Research Initiatives Bangladesh (RIB) and The Hunger Project (THP) of Bangladesh. He asked the Ministry of Expatriates' Welfare and Overseas Employment for information on the number of women workers who were victims of torture by their employers overseas and who had to be repatriated, the role the government played in the process, and measures put in place by it for their physical and mental treatment. To his great satisfaction, he received a detailed response from the ministry, including measures with regard to the safety and welfare of the women. Even if not all the measures are fully respected, the fact that peoples' concerns are being registered in the minds of public authorities is a good omen for the future.

The same journalist had asked the Railways Ministry about government plans to introduce double-lane railway tracks in the northern Bengal routes. He was again pleased to receive a detailed answer on the work in progress of all the eight projects undertaken by the government in that regard. If he and others follow up on the response by tracking the work schedule mentioned therein, the real value of RTI will become apparent.

Let us conclude with an encouraging example from the supply side. It relates to an RTI request filed by an activist of the Hunger Project, Biplob Chandra De Kunal, from Dinajpur district, to the office of the Rangpur Divisional Commissioner. He wanted to know the names, designations, emails and mobile numbers of designated Information and Appeal officers of all government departments of Sadar upazila, Dinajpur district. He not only received the information sought but was also invited to the office of the Assistant Divisional Commissioner, Laila Anjuman Banu, who informed him that upon learning about Kunal's application, the Divisional Commissioner had ordered the inclusion of RTI for discussion at the next monthly meeting, where he ordered all the Deputy Commissioners of Rangpur Division to collect information about RTI-related officials of all the government departments in every district of Rangpur Division and send it to his office. This was duly followed. It is a significant achievement and augurs well for the future of RTI in the country.

We say "bravo" to the Divisional Commissioner and hope others will emulate his example. The RTI ball in Bangladesh has been set rolling. It is up to its citizens to keep it moving faster.

Shamsul Bari and Ruhi Naz are respectively Chairman and Project Coordinator (RTI section) of Research Initiatives, Bangladesh (RIB).
Email: rib@citich-bd.com.