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Violence against women cannot be normalised

A social movement is required to end this

TODAY marks the International Day for the Elimination of Violence against Women which remains a global curse. According to United Nations (UN) data, 1 in 3 women and girls are subjected to sexual or physical violence, most often perpetrated by their intimate partners. 750 million women and girls alive today had been forced into underage marriage, meaning that they had been married before they had turned 18, and 48 percent of women married or in a relationship, are not allowed to make decisions about contraceptives, sexual relations or healthcare. The situation in Bangladesh is no different. Odhikar's data suggests that in 2018, 157 women and girls had to face sexual harassment or stalking, and 142 women were subjected to dowry related violence, with 71 women being murdered.

Staggering as the numbers are, they portray a very grim picture of us—the society—and our mind-sets. Violence against women are perpetrated in many forms: rape; child marriage; dowry related violence; domestic abuse, which includes battery; stalking; sexual harassment at workplaces and educational institutions; and sometimes, violence perpetrated by one's own family members—foeticide and female infanticide being pervasively prevalent in many countries. And reports of such violence are only increasing in frequency and brutality. On November 4, this daily published a news of a woman being tied to a tree and mercilessly beaten by her husband and in-laws for allegedly damaging their cabbage field in Bogura. We read the story in horror, and perhaps even talked about the medieval style beating the woman was subjected to, over our morning cup of tea, and by the end of the day, this back page story got buried under the more pressing issues of our lives—the T20 cricket win of Bangladesh over India the previous night, the problem of bad debts or BCL's atrocities. And while these are important stories as well, stories that we need to talk about, the story of the woman in Bogura demanded much more—a change in mind-set along with immediate concrete actions by us all to prevent this from ever happening again.

Violence against women is still happening because we as a society are allowing it to happen. We have become so conditioned in the feudal beliefs of the middle-ages that women are lesser beings and violence against them is normal, that even in the 21st century we cannot do more than just expressing our occasional concern about the prevalence of it.

And while the government is trying to come up with laws and policies to eliminate this social menace, it demands a social movement by us the citizens, because unless we become conscious and raise our voices against violence against women, our girls and women will continue to suffer. A day or a week, or a fortnight is not enough to address this problem, it needs years of efforts from us all to bring about a real change.

Preaching the gospel to the devil

Moon's homily to Myanmar's junta lacks substance

IT is a pity that the words of the former UN Secretary General will have no effect at all on the hearts and minds of the military rulers in Myanmar. They are inured to all criticisms, censure and condemnation. But while we thank Mr Moon for his words, we are disappointed; we wish he was more straightforward and forthright in his remarks while exhorting the government of Myanmar to act honourably. We can understand that as the Secretary General one has to be very measured in one's remarks and be very politically correct. But now that he has no such constraints of that high office, he might have articulated the facts and spoken the truth to power.

It is regrettable that there are still some who carry the notion that platitudes and sermons will work with the government of Myanmar. Unfortunately, they are not in sync with reality. Here is a government that has ridden rough shod over international sentiments and indulged in a pre-planned pogrom of an ethnic minority. To ask them to act generously and compassionately is a waste of one's effort. Myanmar's actions in Northern Rakhine have drawn international censure but have had little effect on the rulers in Naypyidaw.

A political solution is what everybody wants because there is no other alternative. But is that what the Myanmar government wants? The International Criminal Court has taken cognisance of the case and approved to start an investigation into crimes committed against Rohingyas. And the ICC judges have expressed their apprehension that the killing of the Rohingyas might have been a part of the state's policy. That being the case, a political solution is far from the minds of the rulers in Myanmar. The only solution they are pursuing is the "final solution", i.e. total extermination of an ethnic group. The world leaders should be alive to this reality and rather than merely dispense homilies, act more decisively to prevent that from happening.

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

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Why risk the environment?

The government has reportedly acquired land in Cox's Bazar to build 17 coal-fired power plants by 2031. A fact-finding mission by two environmentalist groups found that Cox's Bazar will become one of the most polluted places in the country after these power plants start their operation.

While we need to increase our energy output, it is difficult to make sense of why the government is adamant to build the power plants in Cox's Bazar.

Previously, the government took up similar projects close to the Sundarbans. While people are aware of Bangladesh's energy needs, what is disturbing is the locations chosen by the government for such projects.

Saiful Hossain, Chattogram

'Chaos in transport sector cannot be solved by enforcing the law alone'

Dr Md Shamsul Hoque, a leading transport expert, professor at the Department of Civil Engineering and former director at Accident Research Institute (ARI) of BUET, talks to Naznin Tithi of The Daily Star about why enforcing the new transport law would bring no results unless the systemic flaws are removed through proper and efficient planning.

The new transport law has been watered down quite a bit because of opposition from the transport owners and workers. Even so, the workers called a strike recently demanding amendments to the law. How would you evaluate the new law and the workers' demands?

Before drafting the new law, a lot of research had been done. In 2010, we did a comprehensive study on this. We analysed the previous law and the best practices of countries around the world. Our transport sector has gone through a lot of changes in the last 36-37 years. And the old law was not enough to bring discipline in the sector—the fines and jail terms were negligible. So, enacting a new law was long overdue. In the draft law, the fines and jail terms were given in such a way so that nobody finds any of the provisions discriminatory.

However, the government has no control over the transport sector and it is basically ruled by a handful of big organisations. The covered van owners have been working as a pressure group everywhere. After a number of strikes were enforced by them, the government was forced to make some changes in the draft law.

Even so, problem was created when the government went to enforce the new law without making the necessary reforms in the system. I would say, such attempts were bound to fail.

The covered van owners and workers had called the strike knowing very well that if they did not run their vehicles, businesses would bear the brunt—because these illegally modified vehicles have become an integral part of our export-import business.

These vehicles are illegal even according to our previous transport law. It is a type of transport which is found nowhere in the world, not even in our neighbouring countries such as India, Pakistan, Nepal or Bhutan. This vehicle has been built by modifying a truck. Currently, there are 22,000 such vehicles in the country.

Three years ago, I gave a presentation to the government on covered vans. There were four ministers present at the event, as well as secretaries to the government. But after the presentation, the government only took initiatives to remove the



Dr Md Shamsul Hoque

bumper and the angle of the vehicles while they overlooked the fact that the whole structure of a covered van is actually modified, which is illegal as per our law.

The number of covered vans has not increased to 22,000 in a day. When they modified the truck to carry more goods, nobody from the authorities stopped them. When they overloaded their trucks, nobody stopped them. They were emboldened to go on with their illegal activities because of the inaction of the authorities, which also encouraged others to invest in these vehicles.

If all the covered vans are illegal according to the law, isn't it natural for the owners and workers to call a strike? None of them are foolish enough to run these vehicles and end up being fined or jailed. What I think is, whenever the government will try to enforce the law, they will go on work abstention.

What is your opinion about the nine-point demand made by the transport workers? Do you find any of them logical?

Many of their demands are in fact logical. Whenever any road crash occurs, the blame always goes to the driver of the big vehicle involved in the crash. But an accident does not always take place due to their mistake. Oftentimes, accidents

happen when a big vehicle tries to save a Nosimon or Korimon. Unfortunately, the investigation in such cases is carried out by the police, BRTA, and other road authorities. There is no representation of the transport workers.

So, this time the workers have become very strategic. They are saying that they are willing to be sentenced by the law but only after an impartial investigation is held. They proposed that Buet should be included as an investigative authority among others. And I don't think the government can take this challenge.

Another demand that they have made is, as long as there is no legal parking facility, the vehicles cannot be fined for illegal parking. From 1996, the bus owners have been demanding a bus terminal in Nimtoli, Dhaka, but the government still hasn't obliged. If the government ever goes on an open debate with the transport owners, I am sure they will lose to the owners.

What do you think the government should have done before enforcing the law?

The government should have enforced the law on a test basis first. They should have started with the BRTC. Had they done so, they would have known by now the loopholes in the system. They would have known that the BRTC buses are parked in front of the secretariat for lack of designated spots; they would have known that many buses do not have fitness, etc. By doing this, the government could have gained some idea of where to start.

But what we are observing now is, the law is being enforced on the weak and the powerless while the beneficiaries of our chaotic transport system remain above it. Reckless driving and jaywalking are only the tip of the iceberg. If we do not see the underlying reasons, if we do not get to the root of the problem, nothing will change. I would say, the government is not on the right track. The way the government wants to correct the system—by holding the drivers and pedestrians accountable for traffic chaos—the problem will never be solved. I think if anyone should be held accountable for the chaos on our roads, it is the BRTA, Rajuk, and the police.

Under the circumstances, is it at all possible to bring order on our roads?

Surely, the chaos on our roads cannot be solved through enforcing the law. The government tried to compensate for their planning deficit by enforcing the law. They should have known that the deficit in planning cannot be offset by anything.

If the new law is implemented, the covered vans won't be able to ply the roads, the *legunas* won't be able to ply the roads, the seating/gate-lock services will not be there. Frankly, I don't understand how the government will enforce the law.

However, if the government sincerely wants to bring order in the transport sector, it should take some tough and unpopular decisions. As a first step, the BRTA should stop giving registrations to new vehicles, including motorcycles. Since the number of vehicles on our roads are beyond the capacity of our roads, such a decision will surely improve the traffic situation. The government took such an unpopular decision in the power sector. It decided to stop giving new power connections for two years and remained strict about it. Although the government was criticised at first, the decision was later commended by all.

What is more, we need to plan scientifically. We have planned a mega-city where there is no legal truck terminal or city bus terminal. But strangely, we are trying to enforce the law against the vehicles for illegal parking. We always say that our population is big and we have less space, but when we plan anything for the city, we seem to forget this basic fact.

Let me give you an example of proper planning. We always say that the drivers are unruly, that they do not abide by the law and drive recklessly. But what is surprising is that these same drivers become law-abiding citizens when they drive the buses of Dhaka Chaka. Because in Dhaka Chaka, the drivers work on monthly salary. There is no relation between their income and the number of passengers they carry on each trip. So the drivers drive responsibly without being given any special training. This happened because there was proper planning in place.

INTERNATIONAL DAY FOR THE ELIMINATION OF VIOLENCE AGAINST WOMEN

End rape—an intolerable cost to society

This year the UNiTE (United Nation's Secretary General's UNiTE by 2030 to End Violence Against Women campaign) will mark the 16 Days of Activism against Gender-Based Violence, from November 25 to December 10, under the theme, "Orange the World: Generation Equality Stands against Rape!"

PHUMZILE MLAMBO-NGCUKA

IF I could have one wish granted, it might well be a total end to rape. That means a significant weapon of war gone from the arsenal of conflict, the absence of a daily risk assessment for girls and women in public and private spaces, the removal of a violent assertion of power, and a far-reaching shift for our society.

Rape isn't an isolated brief act. It damages flesh and reverberates in memory. It can have life changing, unchosen results—a pregnancy or a transmitted disease. Its long-lasting, devastating effects reach others: family, friends, partners and colleagues. In both conflict and in peace it shapes women's decisions to move from communities through fear of attack or the stigma for survivors. Women and girls fleeing their homes as refugees also risk unsafe transport and insecure living conditions that can lack locked doors, adequate lighting and proper sanitation facilities. Girls married as children in search of increased security at home or in refugee camps can get caught up in legitimised conditions of rape, with little recourse for those wishing to escape, such as shelter and safe accommodation.

In the vast majority of countries, adolescent girls are most at risk of sexual violence from a current or former husband, partner or boyfriend. As we know from our work on other forms of violence, home is not a safe place for millions of women and girls.

Almost universally, most perpetrators of rape go unreported or unpunished. For women to report in the first place requires a great deal of resilience to re-live the attack, a certain amount of knowledge of where to go, and a degree of confidence in the responsiveness of the services sought—if indeed there are services available to go to. In many countries, women know that they are overwhelmingly more likely to be blamed than believed when they report sexual assault, and they have to cope with an unwarranted sense of



Phumzile Mlambo-Ngcuka

shame. The result of these aspects is a stifling of women's voices around rape, significant under-reporting and continuing impunity for perpetrators. Research shows that only a small fraction of adolescent girls who experience forced sex seek professional help. And less than 10 percent of women who did seek help after experiencing violence contacted the police.

One positive step to increase accountability is to make rape universally illegal. Currently more than half of all countries do not yet have laws that explicitly criminalise marital rape or that are based on the principle of consent. Along with criminalising rape, we need

to get much, much better at putting the victim at the centre of response and holding rapists to account. This means strengthening the capacity of law enforcement officials to investigate these crimes and supporting survivors through the criminal justice process, with access to legal aid, police and justice services as well as health and social services, especially for women who are most marginalised.

Having more women in police forces and training them adequately is a crucial first step in ensuring that survivors begin to trust again and feel that their complaint is being taken seriously at every stage of what can be a complex process. Progress

also requires that we successfully tackle the many institutional and structural barriers, patriarchal systems and negative stereotyping around gender that exist in security, police and judicial institutions, as they do in other institutions.

Those who use rape as a weapon know just how powerfully it traumatises and how it suppresses voice and agency. This is an intolerable cost to society. No further generations must struggle to cope with a legacy of violation.

We are Generation Equality and we will end rape!

This is the UN Women Executive Director's Statement for the International Day for the Elimination of Violence against Women, November 25, 2019.

PHOTO: ELMA OKIC/UN WOMEN