

We have a law but domestic violence is not falling

Awareness and implementation will make it work

IT is a shocking reality that domestic violence, a malaise that we have been plagued with for decades, intensified in 2020 when the Covid-19 pandemic broke out. According to Ain O Shalish Kendra, 554 women were victims of domestic violence last year, with 337 being killed by their husbands and 71 by the husband's family members. When it came to filing cases for incidences of domestic violence, the number was only 35. This is despite the existence of a law that specifically ensures a victim's right to get assistance from law enforcement officers as well as the required medical facilities and legal services. The Domestic Violence (Prevention and Protection) Act—the result of a collaboration between women rights activists and the government, provides protection orders for victims, the right to reside in the marital home, temporary custody of children and recovery of personal assets. But despite such a progressive law, very few women have taken recourse to it, according to a report in this daily yesterday. Why is this so?

Most women do not even know that such a law exists or that it is possible to get legal redress or protection when domestic abuse occurs. Given the frightening increase in domestic violence, thousands of regular incidents of domestic violence are going unreported, which is all the more worrying.

A study mentioned in our report found that not a single case has been filed under this law in Bhola and Sherpur for the last 10 years. In other districts, the number of cases filed is also very low.

What is most revealing is that the study found, after interviewing some survivors of domestic violence, that they were not told to file a case under the act by the police, local government representatives or even local NGOs when they reached out for help. This is despite the fact that upazila women affairs officers have been made Enforcement Officers responsible for reporting domestic violence to the court and helping the victims get legal aid, sending them to a safe shelter and other support services.

In reality, the enforcement officers are unavailable for immediate support because they are overburdened with other duties and also do not have enough resources to give that support due to budget constraints.

Thus, while we have the law and provisions to support and protect victims—it is all on paper with no implementation from the various quarters concerned. The government must take decisive steps to activate the law it has enacted and ensure that the mechanisms it has placed, in theory at least, are efficient in providing the support for which they were intended. Women must have shelters they can go to; the police and local administration, especially the union parishad members, must help the victim in every way possible; and there must be budget allocations so that enforcing officers can provide support to the victims. Most of all, women must be made aware that this law exists and the legal process must be accessible for women, so that they can get redress for the violence they have been subjected to. Domestic violence is an abhorrent crime that debilitates women, children, the family and society as a whole. We must all work together to put an end to it.

Another life lost in a road accident

How long till the families of victims get justice?

THE recent addition of a woman to the list of casualties resulting from road accidents is testament to the fact that our authorities have failed to bring under control the high rate of deaths from road accidents in the country. The latest tragedy occurred when the woman was trying to cross a busy street near the Golap Shah Mazar of Gulistan along with her daughter, and both of them became trapped between two buses that were trying to overtake each other. Although the daughter was able to free herself in time, the mother was crushed under one of the buses that went into reverse. So far, both the buses have been seized and one of the drivers has been detained, while another perpetrator is on the run.

This incident is a clear-cut example of drivers of large vehicles ignoring road traffic rules, which happens far too often in Bangladesh. Due to the lack of implementation of existing traffic laws and the impunity that is often enjoyed by drivers whose actions have caused accidents, we are continuing to see such reckless behaviour on our streets. Besides, the mutually beneficial affiliation between transport workers and owners and the absence of an obligation to pay sufficient compensation to victims' families, either by the perpetrators of road accidents or the people who employ them, are some of the reasons why street fatalities are continuing unabated.

Although the government has replaced the dated Motor Vehicles Ordinance 1983 with the new Road Transport Act 2018 with a view to curb road accidents, the lack of implementation of this Act has reduced it to being a mere piece of paperwork. Additionally, the RTA 2018 does not do enough to hold transport owners accountable for the behaviour of their drivers, even though we are all aware that these cases of speeding often occur because drivers are trying to meet the daily quota assigned to them by their employers.

How long will the situation continue like this, with innocent lives being lost on our dangerous roads on an almost daily basis? The authorities must act urgently to implement all of the provisions of the Road Transport Act with due diligence and dismantle the syndicate of influential figures, transport owners and drivers who continue to evade responsibility for their actions and act with impunity. There is no point in having laws if they are not going to be implemented, and it is the duty of the state to ensure that the families of road accident victims receive justice.



SHUPROVA TASNEM

ON March 2, the Prothom Alo shared a post that would move even the hardest of hearts—a photo of Dhaka South City Corporation cleaner Nurjahan Begum, pressing her hands together with tears in her eyes, begging the executive magistrate not to demolish her temporary homestead in Fulbaria, Dhaka. Behind her, it is clear that her pleas will be ignored—a hammer is already raised, poised to knock down her flimsy shelter to make way for the Mayor Hanif Flyover.

This picture leads to the obvious question—why is a cleaner employed by the government living in such dire need, made homeless by a government project? In 2018, when I investigated the wage structure of city corporation cleaners for a report, I found that “tendered labourers” hired out by private contractors were being paid as little as Tk 5,000 per month, while working every day of the week for daily wages. I remember interviewing a woman who broke down when speaking of her two sisters, both of them City Corporation cleaners who died in road accidents while on the job. At the time, she was working around 14 hours a day in part-time jobs, struggling to raise her children and two of her nieces.

When it comes to writing about women's issues, I usually find myself in a dilemma. On one hand, I can immediately think of 27 different things that affect my life as a woman in a patriarchal society that makes me want to scream into a pillow on an almost daily basis. On the other, I'm acutely aware that I speak from a position of privilege—an educated, working professional with feminist family members, writing in English for an English-reading audience—and nothing I experience as a woman comes even close to what Nurjahan Begum and other working class women are going through.

Perhaps that is why there exists the complaint from certain quarters about feminism not being representative enough, and they aren't always wrong; although more often than not, their criticism is an attempt to dismiss feminism altogether rather than make it more inclusive. However, as we stand on the brink of turning into a developing country, with greater development opening up possibilities of greater equality, now is the time for us, the women who are in positions to have their voices heard, to look inwards and remind ourselves that there are over 80 million women from hugely different backgrounds and contexts who live in Bangladesh today, and a majority of them are fighting battles on a front that we will never experience in the same way.

When reflecting on my positionality in this, I've realised that my struggles have often dealt with social and cultural barriers—not being able to wear what I want in public spaces, being restricted to certain gendered roles within family hierarchies, being judged for engaging in behaviours that do not align with traditional, patriarchal views of women etc. While in no way belittling these experiences (they are mine, after all!), from this perspective, it is far too easy to align oneself with what some academics have referred to as “neoliberal feminism”—a line of thought that overemphasises individual liberties and puts the onus on women for “empowering” themselves, without actively recognising socioeconomic and cultural structures of power that shape women's lives and entrench gender

insurance, job security etc.

But when a well-known Bangladeshi businesswoman reportedly dismisses worries over the spread of Covid-19 in RMG factories by making off-hand comments about how poorer people have better immune systems, all the while acting like the factories are doing the poor a favour by providing employment—while at the same time, surveys from that period show that missing out on even a month's wages can push workers into poverty and force them to reduce crucial spending on healthcare and nutrition—we have to acknowledge that there is a problem.

When female migrant workers continue to return to Bangladesh with horrific stories of violence (if they are even alive to tell their tales); when domestic workers still cannot take days off, get



City Corporation cleaner Nurjahan Begum begging for her temporary shelter to not be dismantled.

PHOTO: DIPU MALAKAR, PROTHOM ALO

inequality beyond an individual woman's ability to simply “break free” with a little bit of confidence and entrepreneurial spirit.

In *The Rise of Neoliberal Feminism*, Catherine Rottenberg writes: “Incidentally inciting women to accept full responsibility for their own well-being and self-care, neoliberal feminism ultimately directs its address to the middle- and upper-middle classes, effectively erasing the vast majority of women from view. And, since it is informed by a market calculus, it is uninterested in social justice or mass mobilisation.”

We have heard these arguments too, whether it is from development experts peddling microcredit for women as the miracle cure for poverty in Bangladesh— with little thought towards the unpaid care work or uninsured business risks (and zero labour rights) these women have to take on meanwhile—or from garments factory owners who highlight the improved economic positions of garments workers while ignoring their inability to organise properly and demand better working conditions, health

healthcare provisions or become part of the formal labour force regardless of repeated attempts to enact a law that protects them; and when tea workers, many of them indigenous women, have to negotiate for months on end for the sake of a living wage of Tk 300/day and only end up with a Tk 18 rise that gives them a meagre Tk 120/day—we have to admit to ourselves that the neoliberal dream of the empowered working woman, living a life of dignity and equality, can oftentimes be a complete fallacy if it ignores the power structures that work against women from disadvantaged/minority backgrounds.

And as our growing GDP rates correspond with growing female labour force participation, it is becoming clearer that the battle for women's rights will ultimately be closely tied to the battle for workers' rights in Bangladesh. Obviously, this doesn't mean that workers' rights are solely about women, only that any analysis of gender inequality is incomplete without also looking at the other inequalities that can add to and exacerbate it. In a world where social justice can often take the backseat to economic development, inequalities of

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class are bound to have a strong impact on the rights of women.

The recent mass movement against rape can be an interesting example here. It is safe to say that the fear of sexual violence hangs over the head of almost every Bangladeshi woman, and it is this solidarity that sparked such widespread protests last year. However, one of the most gruesome of those cases was the gang-rape of a woman from a household so impoverished that the knowledge of her abuse only reached the justice system when a video of it went viral. Although the hard work of Bangladeshi feminists has led to the enactment of laws that protect women, structural inequalities can still prevent them from accessing these laws. It is also pertinent that around the same time, an indigenous woman was gang-raped in Khagrachhari, but her story has all but disappeared, demonstrating how inequalities of race and religion can also make certain women invisible.

In 1986, feminist scholar Chandra Mohanty famously criticised Western scholarship for reducing women from the “Third World” into a single, collective “other”. In later works, she extended this criticism to other actors who can also be blind to these structural power relations, writing, “the assumption [is] that categories of race and class have to be invisible for gender to be visible”.

As we move forward with the women's movement, we have to ensure that we urban, middle class feminists are also not guilty of lumping Bangladeshi women into a single, collective other. I personally believe self-interrogation is the best place to start. It isn't easy to claim our individuality in a society that constantly wants us to keep our mouths shut and “know our place”. But while on the important path to claiming our individual liberties, we cannot leave behind the women for whom the bigger picture of social justice and human rights is perhaps more urgent.

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Is the Commonwealth declining?



SELINA MOHSIN

BANGLADESH is one of the 54 members of the Commonwealth—but how many Bangladeshis are aware of this and that March 8 was Commonwealth Day? And what significance does this membership hold for us? While some may know only of the Commonwealth Games, most of us are unaware of the history behind the formation of this association and its relationship with Bangladesh.

In 1949, a Commonwealth of Nations of former British colonies and dominions was formed to promote collaboration and good governance among its members. A Secretariat was established in Marlborough House in UK with a Secretary General. It was decided that all countries would have equal status, but may be expelled from membership for violation of human rights and rule of law. This was exemplified in 1971, when Pakistan was expelled for violation of the human rights of millions of Bangladeshis (then East Pakistanis). Over five decades later, a Commonwealth Heads of Government Meeting (CHOGM) is still held every two years and is headed by Queen Elizabeth II (who is head of state in 16 countries within the Commonwealth realm).

But does the Commonwealth have a future in today's rapidly changing world? If so, how does it assist Bangladesh in the present era?

In July 2019, the Commonwealth Secretariat's Countering Violent Extremism (CVE) Unit launched a project called *Amader Porichoi* (Our Identity) in Bangladesh. It included teachers, government officials and students from various universities. They shared views on cross-generational experiences of the Bangladeshi identity, both pre- and post-1971, including awareness of misinformation and fake news. A film named *Shongram*, produced by British-Bangladeshi Munsur Ali, was also screened. The government welcomed

the innovative project in the lead-up to the 50th anniversary of Bangladesh's independence.

Furthermore, from 2011 to 2013, the then Foreign Minister of Bangladesh, Dr Dipu Moni, chaired the Commonwealth Ministerial Action Group (CMAG). Subsequently, in 2020, the current Foreign Minister, Abdul Momen, was appointed Chair of the CMAG to resolve the Maritime Territorial Dispute between British Guyana and Venezuela.

It is important to note that Bangladesh is a member of several of the association's initiatives, including the Commonwealth Clean Ocean Alliance, Ocean and Climate Change, Mangrove Ecosystems, Livelihoods for Sustainable Aquaculture,



The Commonwealth logo.

and Sustainable Blue Economy Action Group. Bangladesh is also a member of the Digital and Regulatory Connectivity clusters of the Commonwealth Connectivity Agenda.

The Commonwealth Foundation is known for working with grassroots NGOs. It prompted the UK anti-poverty charity War on Want (along with its Department for International Development) to assist after the tragic Rana Plaza collapse in 2013. They developed a campaign entitled “Never Again: making fashion factories safe”, which helped in the signature of a legally-binding Bangladesh Accord on Fire and Building Safety by over 150 of the biggest RMG companies, in order to prevent such disasters in the future.

The Commonwealth also shares valuable connections with organisations outside governments. It has a forum of a whopping 70 accredited organisations known as the Commonwealth Family. The Association of Commonwealth Universities, for instance, is a critical link for academic connectivity through Commonwealth Scholarships Programmes, enabling Bangladeshi students to study in Britain. The Commonwealth Foundation strengthens NGOs and civil society in terms of democracy, gender equality, child rights, and the promotion of art and culture. In Bangladesh, it has created a Consortium for Street Children (CSC) and is working with Dhaka Ahsania Mission, Grambangla Unnayan Committee and other local development organisations to end the discrimination faced by an estimated 1.5 million street children in Bangladesh. There is also the Commonwealth Writers Association, which awards good writing from the Commonwealth countries. Two Bangladeshi-born writers have won the Commonwealth Writers' Prize “Best Book Award” so far—Adib Khan in 1995 and Tahmina Anam in 2008.

Besides these, the Commonwealth Business School uses the network of the Commonwealth for promoting trade and investment. It links businesses and governments to increase trade and facilitate ICT and private-public partnerships. It includes some of the fastest growing economies like Singapore, Malaysia, India, South Africa and, of course, Bangladesh. It is noteworthy that trade worth USD three trillion takes place annually within the Commonwealth.

Similarly, the Commonwealth Science Conference brings together outstanding researchers and leading scientists to address global challenges, strengthen capacities of member countries and influence policy agendas. A great example of the Conference's success is Australian scientist Veena Sahajwalla, who has invented a new process of reducing CO2 emissions in steel-making from 50 percent to 100 percent by eliminating the use of purified coal and substituting it for coffee grounds. She presented her ideas—titled “Aligning recycling and

manufacturing”—virtually on February 23, 2021 during the Commonwealth Science Conference 2021.

Out of all this, the best-known aspect of this association is certainly the Commonwealth Games, which is the second largest multi-sport event in the world. Bangladesh has competed in eight Games, winning eight awards for shooting.

Most Commonwealth states share similar legal systems, administrative structures, the Westminster parliamentary style of democracy and the usage and/or practice of the English language. Games such as football, cricket, badminton, golf, squash and tennis, plus military and naval ranks, are common to most member states.

So given the association's healthy rapport with our nation, why is the Commonwealth so little known in Bangladesh? Information about the Commonwealth is not included in school textbooks as chapters on the United Nations (UN) are.

The Commonwealth Society of Bangladesh is also quite inactive. It usually holds one seminar on the Annual Commonwealth Theme, even though it would now be very convenient to hold seminars on important UN Days through the use of social media. I myself was involved with this Society for two years and had invited all High Commissioners and relevant persons to attend events using social media to promote the Society. It has been chaired by several ex-ministers, yet no one made any serious effort to secure a venue.

In Malaysia, for instance, the Commonwealth Society has a large venue for itself, complete with a tennis court, library and other amenities. The same goes for the Royal Commonwealth Society of Sri Lanka and other countries elsewhere.

Let us hope that someday, the Commonwealth Society of Bangladesh will be chaired by a dynamic person using innovative ways to make the Commonwealth properly known to the general public.

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