

# Bending the arc of development towards gender equality

A tribute to Sir Fazle Hasan Abed



**"B**RAC'S approach has been to put power in the hands of the poor, especially poor women and girls," said Sir Fazle Hasan Abed.

We were sitting in his office on the 19th floor of the BRAC Headquarters in Dhaka. Abed Bhai was describing BRAC's pioneering work with women and girls. Although I had heard him recount these anecdotes many times and had also seen some of the programmes on the ground, it was always inspiring to listen to him.

Twelve million mothers learned to make oral rehydration therapy so that children would no longer die from diarrhoea. Thousands of rural women became poultry micro-entrepreneurs, rearing and vaccinating chickens and spurring the growth of a new sector in the rural economy. Hundreds of thousands of housewives trained as para-professional teachers and even larger numbers as community health workers so that elementary education and primary healthcare could be available in every village. Millions of women pulled themselves and their families out of poverty with BRAC's support, improving their lives materially and also gaining voice and respect in their households and communities.

As dusk fell over the slums and rooftops of Dhaka that evening, Abed Bhai turned from talking about what BRAC had achieved for women and girls in Bangladesh to what still remains to be done elsewhere, about where and how it must scale up, innovate, break barriers and set new records. His plans were as audacious as ever, his energy seemingly abundant. But we both knew time was running out for him and the baton must pass on to others. When we next met a few months later, it was to say goodbye as he lay in bed, his eyes closed. Weeks later, on December 20, 2019, Sir Fazle Hasan Abed passed away.

Of all the remarkable contributions for which Abed Bhai is remembered today, I believe none has been more ambitious in

scale, nor more impactful in consequence, than his work to empower women and girls. His ground-breaking approaches to development turned perceived wisdom on its head and transformed the lives of millions of women and girls in Bangladesh and beyond.

"Small is beautiful but big is necessary," he said frequently—and with good reason. Scale matters if you want to end poverty, and there is so much of it, especially among women.

He often spoke of poor women as the best managers he had ever seen because with little income or assets, they fed the family, looked after the children and ran their households. "If poor women can manage poverty well, why should they not manage development?" he would say, packing in that one statement tomes of wisdom about women's agency.

Watching women toil in the villages and small towns of Bangladesh, he saw in their thrift, ingenuity and resilience the promising talent of would-be entrepreneurs. Women became the key resource as well as the subject of BRAC's poverty eradication strategies.

With astute business sense, Abed Bhai invested heavily in women and girls through education, health, legal services and microfinance programmes, income generation opportunities, community development and social mobilisation. BRAC's approach of working directly with communities to develop solutions and of testing, monitoring and modifying programmes constantly to make them more responsive gave new meaning to women's empowerment.

Women's agency was explicit in what is one of BRAC's—and Bangladesh's—great success stories: the Oral Rehydration Therapy (ORT) programme. Over a decade, starting from 1979, BRAC visited around 11.8 million homes, covering 98 percent of the total rural households, to teach at least one woman in each household to make oral rehydration therapy with a three-finger pinch of salt, a handful of *gur* (molasses) and half a litre of boiled water. With no particular skills needed, ingredients available in every home and a simple technique for measuring, mothers produced oral rehydration solutions to treat diarrhoea and reduce infant mortality. Today, Bangladesh has one of the

lowest death rates from diarrhoea and one of the highest user rates for ORT in Asia.

In the early 1980s, BRAC created income generation opportunities for women in poultry rearing and trained women to vaccinate chickens for a fee. The government provided free vaccines but there was no cold chain to carry the vaccines from the office of the sub-district livestock officer to the villages. So, BRAC devised a simple system by which the vaccines were packed inside

to other geographies. From adolescent girls in BRAC's schools in Helmand, Afghanistan to the BRAC community health micro-entrepreneurs in small towns in Uganda, thousands of woman and girls broke barriers to take control of their own destiny.

One of BRAC's most transformative programmes is the Ultra Poor Graduation initiative, which focuses on the poorest and most marginalised families, usually women-headed households, who are unable

"graduated" out of ultra-poverty, and even more remarkably, have continued to improve their lives. Many have become successful microfinance savers and borrowers.

As always, Abed Bhai was keen to scale up and readily shared BRAC's experiences with others. Today, the Ultra Poor Graduation Initiative is being replicated in 45 countries with impressive results.

Abed Bhai knew that development cannot be sustained if it does not change the social and cultural norms that hold back the progress of women and girls, but to be successful, the change itself must take into account the cultural context of the community. So, to make girls' education culturally acceptable to tradition-bound families and communities in Afghanistan, BRAC trained thousands of female teachers and engaged hundreds of older women to chaperone the girls from home to school and back. In Bangladesh, where the social context is different, popular theatre and public campaigns are used to transmit messages on gender equality, women's groups are mobilised at the village level to advocate for social change and thousands of paralegals are trained to resolve family disputes in ways that respect women's human rights.

Whether in Afghanistan, Bangladesh or many other countries, the major barrier to women's empowerment and gender equality remains patriarchal values. "Patriarchy is an enemy to both men and women," Abed Bhai declared on International Women's Day in 2018, acknowledging that gender equality was his "unfinished agenda".

Ultimately, the poor woman's struggle is not only a struggle to increase material assets but a struggle for equality, justice and dignity. Much remains to be done to make the world a safer, more equal place for women and girls. The pandemic has made that task harder, and also more urgent and vital. But when I think back to that evening in Abed Bhai's office and how he not only made the impossible possible but also sustainable and scalable, I feel optimistic. The arc of development is long but it bends towards gender equality.

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Brac founder Sir Fazle Hasan Abed talking to some of the NGO's beneficiary farmers during a field visit.

PHOTO: BRAC

ripe bananas to preserve the temperature and provide protection against damage during transport.

These are just a few examples of Abed Bhai's down-to-earth approach to development and his relentless drive for scaling up. He was thrifty, creative and persevering, just like the poor women he admired so much. Today, frugal innovation on scale is a badge that BRAC wears with great pride.

With his characteristic audacity, Abed Bhai carried BRAC's development models

to afford even one full meal a day, live on the fringes of society and are caught in the inter-generational trap of extreme poverty.

For two years, the women are given an income generating "asset" (such as a cow or chickens), a stipend, healthcare, and education for their children, alongside training and counselling to build their financial capabilities, a sense of self-worth and become integrated into the community. Results show that over 95 percent of the almost 1.5 million women and their families benefitting from this programme have

## Ten reforms we need to end impunity for rape



**"JUSTICE IN PRACTICE"**  
IN keeping with this year's theme for International Women's Day, I, as a legal researcher, #ChooseToChallenge how ineffectively our lawmakers have dealt with rape, one of the defining manifestations of gender inequality.

Ever since the birth of our country, laws relating to rape (and violence against women more broadly), have been reformed a number of times, but each time the focus was almost exclusively on making punishment stricter.

According to a recent report submitted by the Special Crime Branch of the Police Headquarters to the Supreme Court, a total of 26,695 rape cases were filed across the country in a 58 month period (between January 2016 and October 2020). This means that, on average, over 5,500 rape cases were filed each year and the actual yearly breakdown showed an upward trend. Considering the fact that a study by Partners for Prevention found that over 90 percent of rapists in Bangladesh faced no legal consequences for raping a woman or girl, the actual figure for rape occurrences is likely to be several times higher.

In solidarity with the anti-rape protests that broke out in October 2020 (and ahead of the reform that was ordained by the President in reaction to it), we at the Rape Law Reform Coalition, a collective of 17 human rights organisations, issued a 10 point demand on rape law reforms. Sadly, this fell on deaf ears and a hasty reform of our rape legislation was made which reflected none of our demands, and will bear little fruit in practice. This is precisely why we need to publicise these 10 demands until they are heard by those who have the power to implement them.

Our first demand is for reform of rape laws to be formulated in line with human rights standards. This will help ensure that any reform is in conformity with the constitutionally guaranteed fundamental rights that were put in place by the founders of our nation to guide any law making. It must also be in line with international human rights law—including the Convention on the Elimination of Discrimination Against Women, Child Rights Convention and the International Convention on Civil and Political Rights—and guided by the recommendations made by the concerned UN treaty bodies over the years. On the one hand, this will ensure protection and access to justice without discrimination for all rape victims/survivors irrespective

of gender, sexuality, religion, race, ethnicity, disability, age and nationality. On the other hand, it will also uphold safeguards on fair trial for those accused, a legal requirement we often forget. One may recall with particular horror the time certain members of our parliament asked for accused rapists to be killed in crossfire—without a trial—while debating in the parliament itself.

Our second demand is for the legal definition of rape in Section 375 of the Penal Code 1860 to be broadened so it covers all forms of non-consensual penetration, irrespective of the gender of the perpetrator or victim/survivor. The current definition excludes adult male and transgender rape victims/survivors, denying them the right to seek justice for being raped.

Our third demand is for penetration to be defined in our laws so the recognition

of the severity of punishment tends to share an inverse relationship with conviction rates. Judges must be allowed to give punishment which is proportionate to the kind of rape that has been committed. In this regard, sentencing guidelines should require judges to factor in both mitigating circumstances (such as the age or mental health of the accused) and aggravating circumstances (such as the use of weapon, force or violence and causing permanent physical or mental impairment of the victim/survivor) when deciding which punishment must be given.

Our fifth demand is for the government to ensure that the justice process is made accessible to rape victim-survivors with disabilities. We can do so by modernising the Evidence Act 1872 to ensure persons with speech, hearing or intellectual disabilities are able to testify without facing any procedural barriers

examination of complainants.

Our seventh demand is for the draft Victim and Witness Protection Act (first proposed by the Law Commission in 2006) to be enacted. This law would allow for institutional protection, emergency shelter, psychosocial support and/or relocation, as required, of victims/witnesses. Most crucially, it will ensure institutional protection is continued until the victim and witness's safety is no longer threatened and satisfactory alternative arrangements have been made. It is precisely the lack of this guarantee which allows the rapist's side, who are usually at a power advantage, from threatening the rape survivor's side to the point they either abandon the prosecution case or are prevented from filing a case in the first place.

Our eighth demand is for the government to establish a state compensation fund for rape survivors. This will enable rape victims/survivors to apply for compensation as of right, irrespective of whether the perpetrator can or has been identified and/or prosecuted for the offence. Currently, the lack of such a system allows rapists to purchase impunity by offering rape survivors or their families paltry sums of money touted as "compensation" in exchange for the criminal case being withdrawn.

Our ninth demand is for the government to ensure gender-sensitisation training for justice sector actors—conduct trainings for police, lawyers (prosecutors and defence), judges and social workers so rape survivors are treated with gender responsiveness and sensitivity when reporting a rape, and during investigation and prosecution. Laws are only as good as the attitudes of those enforcing it.

Our tenth demand is for consent classes to be introduced in schools. We are well aware that formal legal or institutional reform alone can never end impunity for rape. To eliminate rape culture, social reform is indispensable. Introducing lessons on capacity and consent into educational curricula will go a long way in countering misogynistic social norms which undermine female agency and the right to choose. These ten reforms would only scratch the surface when it comes to dismantling the more complex problem of rape culture. However, implementing these will certainly take us a lot closer to ending impunity for sexual violence than the kind of reform our lawmakers have implemented so far. So let's know them, let's understand them and let's demand them till they are met.

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A protester sitting on the street in front of the National Museum in Dhaka wearing a saree printed with anti-rape slogans, on October 10, 2020. PHOTO: AMRAN HOSSAIN

of rape is not restricted to penile-vaginal penetration only. Instead, it must recognise all forms of non-consensual penetration of any part of the victim-survivor's body through the use of objects or any other part of the perpetrator's body, as being rape.

Our fourth demand is for proportionality of punishment, which is a basic principle of criminal justice, to be respected and for sentencing guidelines to be introduced. Currently, the only two available punishments for rape are life imprisonment and the death penalty. Allowing judges to only mete out the two most severe forms of punishment that the law can prescribe has meant that only the most severe (or grotesque) rape cases ever end in convictions. This is because

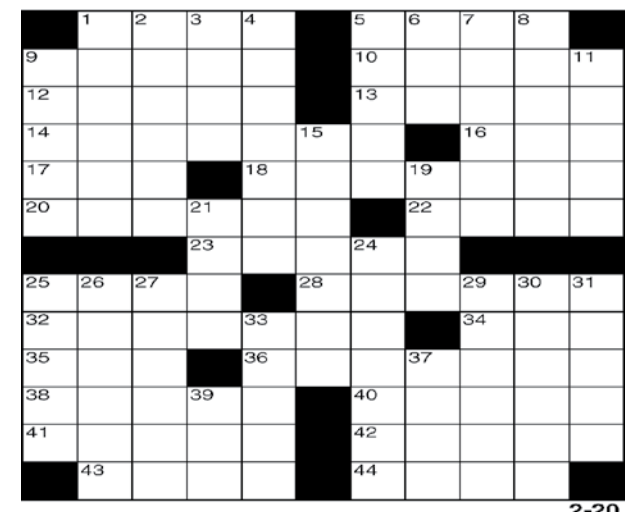
due to their disability during rape trials. Relatedly, police stations and courtrooms must be accessible, such as by having step-free access for those with mobility impairments.

Our sixth demand is for the amendment of Section 155(4) and other relevant sections of the Evidence Act 1872 so the use of character evidence is prohibited in rape trials. Currently, defence lawyers ask humiliating questions and make similar suggestions in an attempt to show a particular rape complainant is of "immoral character" and therefore undermine the value of her testimony in court. This particular reform should also ensure judges are duty bound to prevent defence lawyers from asking degrading questions during cross-

### CROSSWORD BY THOMAS JOSEPH

- ACROSS**
- 1 Tries the soup
  - 5 Min. parts
  - 9 "Hush!"
  - 10 Marsh bird
  - 12 On a cruise
  - 13 Stay away from
  - 14 Spoils
  - 16 Soviet orbiter
  - 17 Epoch
  - 18 One of a tight twosome
  - 20 Smile coyly
  - 22 Beliefs
  - 23 Find absolutely cute
  - 25 Indian dress
  - 28 Chide
  - 32 Bridge player's
- DOWN**
- 1 raise
  - 34 "Very funny!"
  - 35 Take in
  - 36 Crane of fiction
  - 38 Category
  - 40 Upper crust
  - 41 Go piece
  - 42 Ed of "Up"
  - 43 Glided
  - 44 Elevator part
  - 1 Zen goal
  - 2 Jeans measure
  - 3 Diner display
  - 4 Ran through
  - 5 Storage sites
  - 6 Long fish
  - 7 Cookie waste
  - 8 Salt base
  - 9 Gerbil homes
  - 11 Bookish ones
  - 15 Like some workouts
  - 19 Layer
  - 21 Twosome
  - 24 Lucy, for one
  - 25 Ditties
  - 26 Deflects
  - 27 Modernize, as a factory
  - 29 White rat, e.g.
  - 30 Horn player
  - 31 Town official
  - 33 Human, for one
  - 37 To boot
  - 39 Numerical prefix

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### YESTERDAY'S ANSWERS

B	A	C	H	L	E	S	T
A	M	O	U	O	A	T	E
C	O	M	B	G	R	E	T
O	R	E	A	D	E	L	P
N	A	T	U	R	E	S	T
L	O	S	E	R	G	O	R
B	O	H	R	A	L	O	H
O	P	E	I	P	A	N	E
R	E	F	I	N	E	R	R
E	R	O	D	E	E	D	E
D	A	R	E	T	R	A	S
S	E	A	T	E	R	A	S