

'We still have a lot more to do for equality'

Noted human rights activist and academic Dr Hameeda Hossain, one of the founders of Ain o Salish Kendra (ASK) and currently convener of the Sramik Nirapotta Forum (Workers' Safety Forum), has recently been honoured with the 2021 Lifetime Achievement Award from Bangladesh Development Initiative, a non-partisan research and advocacy group of independent scholars based in the US. In this interview with Shuprova Tasneem of The Daily Star, she reflects on her long and illustrious career and the evolution of the rights movements in Bangladesh.

What inspired you to follow this path, and what achievements are you most proud of in terms of the women's movement and the labour movement?

To be honest, I was not that conscious from a young age of the inequalities that exist in our society, or even of the unequal treatment that women receive within their families. My family was fairly progressive; in fact, my father encouraged our education. I think it really hit me after 1971, when I started working in shelters with women who had suffered violence. After that, I worked with artisans in general but particularly women. As I spent more time with them, I started to understand how they had to face the burden of survival, both economically and socially. And then within my own profession, I began to see how different it was for working women. There were few opportunities in the media world. So I think it came upon me gradually, and slowly I engaged with the women's movement. In the early 70s, Bangladesh Mahila Parishad, the largest women's organisation in the country, along with a few other organisations were pressing for women's political participation in policy forums, and for equal wages at work—they were raising the issue of equal rights.

Rather than achievements, I would say it was how we did things that was very important, and I think the collective actions we took and the collective thinking/analysis that we engaged in have been a big marker in my life. For instance, in 1995, when the young domestic worker Yasmin Akhter was picked up by policemen while on her way home to Dinajpur, who then raped her and left her for dead on the streets, it wasn't just a few women or organisations that took up that cause. It became a big national movement, which ultimately led to convictions for the guilty police officials.

The struggle to free women from being

subjected to *fatwa* penalties was another landmark. We achieved this through the legal process, with the Mahila Parishad filing cases such as in 1993, when Noorjahan of Moulvibazar was forced to commit suicide due to a *fatwa*—she was buried in the ground up to her waist and stoned 101 times as "punishment" for a second marriage. However, it took around 20 years for us to get a final judgment from the Supreme Court making *fatwas* that penalised women illegal. And even after that, you still hear of village elders holding forth against women for being "corrupt", so there is still a long way to go.

Looking back, what changes have you seen in the women's movement?

Before 1972, we were talking about economic opportunities—we thought that if women's work was visible, we would have equality. Then women's work did become visible, in garment factories, mills, construction, etc., but equality still evaded us. Later on, Mahila Parishad also took a stand on political participation, with a quota system for more women in parliament because numbers do count to some extent, but we then found that the means of selection greatly weakened the women's positions. If you are selected by the leaders of political parties, the women who get into parliament only raise the leaders' issues, not women's issues. It didn't bring about the change we anticipated. I think the real change has been in using the legal process to establish rights. The courts move very slowly but at least you have laws that allow you to claim your rights and give you some level of bargaining power. That has made a difference.

The second factor that is very important is the emergence of women workers, particularly in the export industries. They still have a rough deal—their wages are not equal to that of men, they work very long hours, and there are not enough safety provisions at



Hameeda Hossain

work—and there are too many examples of factory fires like Tazreen where workers paid such a heavy price. Even so, you can see the changes to some extent. I remember a case in the 90s, where after a death in a garment factory, the only compensation given was a job offer for the sister of the deceased. In the aftermath of the Rana Plaza tragedy, we were able to get brands, employers and other contributors to set up a fund through which they could support workers who had been affected. Of course, it's important to remember that the fight is far from over—we still haven't established the right to a meaningful compensation, which is still under consideration by the High Court.

What other industries are there where women workers are particularly vulnerable? A large number of women are working in

the agricultural sector, in tea production, as well as in small and medium workshops/enterprises. In most of these places, there are no laws that determine their work. We need to think of, first of all, how to create the awareness amongst them that they do have rights, and then how to build up this agenda of rights, with them and for them. The women who are working as paid labour in the agricultural sector are paid very low wages. On top of that, they work long hours, which can impact their health. But overall, the system of hiring labour at hourly/daily wage rates needs to be looked at.

And across the board, we need to look at health provisions. Is it enough to have a few government hospitals where women/workers can go? Shouldn't workers be given some guarantee, by way of a card or something, which would entitle them to free treatment wherever they go? There have been suggestions by trade unions that the government should set up a hospital in Dhaka for workers. But one hospital in Dhaka doesn't answer the needs of women working in Rangpur or Dinajpur, for example. However, if they have something like an ID card that they can present, the local hospitals should be obligated to take them on.

We should also focus on domestic labour and the role of women within their families, where women are continuously working without pay/support. There should be a system of accounting or sharing for women's work at home.

When you were only 15, you won an essay competition sponsored by the New York Herald Tribune on the subject of "The World We Want". Looking back, is the world now what you imagined it would be as a young girl?

At the time, I was studying in Hyderabad, in a conservative college in a conservative place! That essay won me a three-month trip

to the US, which led to my being admitted to Wellesley College on a scholarship, and my whole life pattern changed. If I hadn't taken this opportunity that came to me quite by chance, I would have been stuck in Hyderabad instead of being able to pursue a career at a time when not too many of us could; the only option then was to marry and look after your family.

I find that the younger generations of women are marching far ahead of where we were at that age—their concerns have broadened out and they are taking up very difficult issues to work on, particularly in terms of sexual violence and workers' rights. When Ain o Salish Kendra was first founded in the mid-80s, there were only a few organisations that took up such cases. Today, you can see many similar kinds of organisations all over Bangladesh. There is a great deal of awareness now of the fact that women have rights and we will fight to defend those rights. In a way, there was more of a class divide earlier and a divide between different communities, but now we do see people from different backgrounds working together, although we still need to do much more to include indigenous women into these conversations.

It's very difficult to change culture, though. It's such an age-old thing where women are supposed to fit certain roles and they are, from the beginning, subjected to their parents' wishes, particularly the father's who is the traditional head of the household, and the ideal you are meant to aim for is to get married, as if there is nothing beyond marriage in life. Now that women are taking on so many professional responsibilities and sharing the demands of work outside their family, it's high time we shared the responsibilities at home too, as equal partners. We still have a lot more to do for equality, beginning at the family level and how we raise our children.

A case for integrated nutrition messaging for schoolchildren

SAIRA PARVEEN JOLLY

"MY daughter is counting the different types of food she has during meals. Now she can say 'I eat so-and-so groups of food daily'. My husband also learned the functions of food and tried buying varieties of vegetables for us. But not all food is always available in our area," said Sharifa, a resident of Parbatipur, Dinajpur.

Rabeya from Badarganj, Rangpur shared how her son had started wearing shoes: "He always loved to be barefoot. But now, he has learnt to wear shoes, even when he plays."

These are just a few of the stories that came up during a study on the importance of developing integrated nutrition messages for schoolchildren. The study was conducted by a research team of BRAC James P Grant School of Public Health (JPGSPH) between August 2020 and February 2021 under the supervision of the Ministry of Food, supported by the Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) and funded by the European Union. Many other parents also told us how their children had started recalling food groups, washing hands before meals and brushing their teeth after meals.

The study found out that diet and nutrition related knowledge and behaviour change messages, such as having at least five out of 10 food groups daily and the functions of these food items, and motivated parents to add a variety of food groups to their regular diets—an example of healthy practices that help improve one's nutritional status. There are many other important solutions we may adopt in our daily life, such as having a diverse variety of food items, drinking adequate water, washing hands with soap after defecation and before having meals, etc. These simple practices begin in the family, but due to a lack of knowledge, school-aged children may become vulnerable at a time that is most critical for their development.

When schoolchildren suffer from undernutrition and micronutrient deficiencies, it can have an immediate bearing on their health and development. Physical growth and development of children require not only food and nutrition, but also good immunity, safe water and sanitation, a healthy lifestyle and safe environment. Malnutrition and micronutrient deficiencies expose children to poor school performance, which may lead to them dropping out, hindering their future productivity and compromising the country's socioeconomic development.

According to the Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics 2011, over one-fourth of our population are

children aged five to 16 years. Among them, one in five school-aged children is anaemic. Moreover, 20 to 40 percent of these age cohorts suffer from Vitamin A, Vitamin D, calcium and iodine deficiencies. Conversely, overweight and obesity are an emerging issue among school-aged children. We also observe an increasing trend of overweight and obesity among children ranging from one percent to 17 percent, with children in urban areas being more at risk. This is a huge challenge as obesity in an early age increases the risks of disease and death.

How do we develop interventions for these population cohorts to improve their knowledge and practices related to nutrition, healthy habits and lifestyle? There is ample evidence of good practices in countries like China, Malaysia, Cambodia, Indonesia and Lao PDR. It is reported that several forms of nutrition education—school-based education programmes, web-based education, lectures and supplement

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provisions—could improve dietary patterns and lifestyles of schoolchildren. In the context of Bangladesh, schools could be the best platform to reach out to a large population for influencing healthy food behaviour and practices.

Providing succinct, integrated messages covering food, nutrition, immunity, sanitation and hygiene, physical exercise, lifestyle and environment is critical for the physical and cognitive development of schoolchildren, and the best way to amplify their reach and coverage is to target the children via school textbooks. In the aforementioned study, BRAC JPGSPH reviewed school textbooks and curricula and found that although there were plenty of texts on food, nutrition, hygiene, sanitation, environment, and physical exercise, they were not adequately reaching school children because they are scattered in different chapters across different textbooks.

The idea was to construct simple and culturally-appropriate integrated nutrition messages that schoolchildren could easily access—being visible on one or two pages of text, in both pictorial and narrative

forms. Also included were the FAO-recommended ten food groups in a plate, with narratives such as, "I eat at least five food groups daily", "I do not take junk food", etc. Similarly, pictures were displayed of hand washing with soap and running water, wearing sandals, physical activity and tree plantation and many such simple practices.

However, it must be noted that while integrated nutrition messages among schoolchildren can create practices and habits that can improve child nutrition through simple means, that alone is not enough. The study also found that practicing intake of food with the minimum dietary diversity among children is difficult due to several reasons, including lack of purchasing capacity of their parents, challenge of shifting existing food habits within short time periods, unavailability of food items in local markets, etc. However, regardless of the obstacles, many school students were still seen to adopt various good practices,

showing that such integrated messages are likely to bring quick and easy changes.

The strength of integrated nutrition messaging is that the same messages are developed for all age groups of children and are simple and feasible to practice. Furthermore, it is crucial that the messages are sensitive to the context and purchasing capacity of families. We must also remember that although presenting integrated nutrition messages in school textbooks leads to easy accessibility for students, parents and teachers, this has been hampered by Covid-19 and extended school closures. So we need to focus on making these messages accessible to students beyond textbooks, through web-based platforms or alternate media.

It is urgent now for the policymakers to translate existing knowledge into actions by incorporating integrated nutrition messages into school textbooks and other easily accessible platforms. The Ministry of Food has already been in discussion with the Ministry of Education, and BRAC JPGSPH along with the FAO have drawn the attention of the National

Curriculum and Textbook Board to this issue. The country must act to reinforce healthy behaviour and practices of schoolchildren and invest in communicating integrated

nutrition messages quickly and creatively for the health of the future generations.

Saira Parveen Jolly is a Senior Research Fellow at BRAC James P Grant School of

Public Health, BRAC University. The Principal Investigator of the project mentioned is Professor Dr Kaosar Afsana. The contents of this report are the sole responsibility of the author and do not necessarily reflect the views or policies of the Ministry of Food, FAO and EU.



Government of the Peoples' Republic of Bangladesh
Office of the Chief Chemical Examiner
Institute of Public Health (IPH) Bhaban (2nd Floor)
Bangladesh Police, CID, Mohakhali, Dhaka-1212.



Invitation for Tender

01	Ministry/Division	Ministry of Home Affairs
02	Agency	Bangladesh Police, CID, Dhaka.
03	Procuring entity name	Chief Chemical Examiner, Bangladesh Police, CID, Mohakhali, Dhaka.
04	Procuring entity District	Dhaka.
05	Invitation for	Chemicals (LC-MSMS, HPLC & AR Grade), Narcotics Analysis Ready kits, Chemical Related Gas & Gas Cylinder, Chemical Related Glass Apparatus & Chemical Related Analysis Device.
06	Invitation Ref. No	Memo No- CE/01/2020-21/279(3) Dated 02/05/2021.

KEY INFORMATION

07	Procurement Method	OTM with Frame Work Tenders will be selected in accordance with the procedures set in the guidelines of public Procurement Regulation Rules – 2008 of the Govt. of the People's Republic of Bangladesh.
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FUNDING

08	Budget & Source of fund	Revenue Budget (GOB)
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PARTICULARS


09	Tender Package No	CE-12
10	Tender Package Name	Chemicals (LC-MSMS, HPLC & AR Grade), Narcotics Analysis Ready kits, Chemical Related Gas & Gas Cylinder, Chemical Related Glass Apparatus & Chemical Related Analysis Device.
11	Tender Publication date	Before 04/05/2021
12	Tender Last Selling date	17/05/2021
13	Tender Closing date & time	18/05/2021 time 12.00 hrs
14	Tender Opening date & time	18/05/2021 time 12.30 hrs
15	Name & Address of the office	Office of the Chief Chemical Examiner, Bangladesh Police, CID, Mohakhali, Dhaka.
16	Place/date/time of Pre-tender Meeting	Chemical Examiner's Room, Office of the Chief Chemical Examiner, Bangladesh Police, CID, Mohakhali, Dhaka. 12/05/2021 11.00 am

INFORMATION

17	Eligibility Tenders	Up to date copies of valid Trade License, Bank Solvency Certificate with current balance in BDT, Income Tax Certificate (last fiscal year), VAT Registration Certificate, Minimum 03 years experience in similar natures of works etc.		
18	Brief Description of Chemicals	Mentioned in Tender document.		
19	Brief Description of related services	As per Tender document.		
20	Price of Tender Documents	A complete set of tender document may be purchased by interested bidders on submission written application upon payment of non-refundable fee of taka 1000/- (Only One Thousand) in cash at Office of the Chief Chemical Examiner, Bangladesh Police, CID, Mohakhali, Dhaka.		
21	Name of chemicals	Location	Tender Security (TK)	Completion time
	Chemicals (LCMSMS, HPLC & AR Grade) Chemical Related Gas & Gas Cylinder Narcotics Analysis Ready kits. Laboratory apparatus & analysis Device	Chief Chemical Examiner's Office, Bangladesh Police, CID, Mohakhali, Dhaka	Tk. = 75,000/-	14 days

PROCURING ENTITY DETAILS

22	Name of official inviting tender	Dr. Dilip Kumar Saha
23	Designation of official inviting tender	Chief Chemical Examiner
24	Address of official inviting tender	Chief Chemical Examiner's Office, Bangladesh Police, CID, Mohakhali, Dhaka.
25	Contact details of official inviting tender	Phone-9898676, Fax-9892870
26	The procuring entity reserves the right to accept or reject all tenders.	
27	An application should be submitted to our office during purchasing the schedule	


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