

Breaking taboo with needles

AZIBOR RAHMAN WITH FIROZ A MUZAHID

Seeing young Aminul Islam's keen interest in embroidery and needlework, the villagers used to tease him saying, "Embroidery is for women and girls. Why do you like it so much? Are you a housewife?"

The persistent shaming could not bring Aminul down. Ultimately his unwavering passion for embroidery and needlework paved the way for a prosperous future.

Born to an impoverished family in Laxmandia village of Jhenidah's Shailakupa upazila, the 55-year-old Aminul is now a successful entrepreneur and supplier of embroideries to renowned handcraft stores in the country.

His range of embroidered handicrafts includes traditional embroidered quilt (Nokshikantha), framed tapestries, wall hangings, curtains, cushion covers, bed covers, hand-woven jewellery bags, and saris and three-piece sets (for women).

In 1987, when Aminul's father Golam Kausar Ali died, his mother Akhtar Banu had seven children to rear by herself. Left with nothing but a house on 10 decimals of land, Akhtar Banu resorted to doing embroidery for a living. There were days when the family had to survive on only vegetables grown in their yard.

Aminul, the youngest of the siblings, studied sitting next to his mother while she did various forms of needlework including embroidery, quilting and stitching.

While his brothers worked at agricultural fields of others and sisters were busy doing household chores, young Aminul helped his mother with her embroideries.

Despite being tormented by the neighbours, Aminul set his mind on being an embroidery artist. By the time he finished his SSC in



Embroidery artist Aminul Islam in front of a Nokshikantha wall hanging, made at his workshop in Laxmandia village of Jhenidah's Shailakupa upazila.

PHOTO: COLLECTED

1982 and HSC in 1986, Aminul became a master embroidery artist.

Success eventually followed him after he went to Dhaka to seek his fortune in 1990. Soon enough, he received an order of embroideries worth Tk 7,000 from renowned brand store Aarong. Within five years the monthly order volume from the store reached Tk 40 lakh

and Aminul never looked back.

Ever since, Aarong recognised Aminul as their best supplier every year and in 2018 they conferred 'Best Quality Award' on him. A solo exhibition of embroideries designed by Aminul was held at Kahal Gallery in Tokyo of Japan in 2019.

Gias Uddin, Aarong's manager

administration and logistics support, said Aminul has been their best supplier since 1995 as the merchandise supplied by him has been of highest quality.

Between 1990 and 2018 he procured more land beside his ancestral land to build a workshop for rural women who earn their livelihood by doing embroidery for him.

But the two-storey house, spread out on about 15 bighas of land, went unused as the workers preferred to work from their own homes while looking after their children and doing household work.

Avid nature lover Aminul then decided to turn the empty house into a country retreat. The house now overlooks a meticulously landscaped lush green garden adorned with nearly 5,000 various local and foreign plants, shrubs and hedges -- trimmed skilfully to perfection. Fruit trees are planted only on the rooftop of the house.

Aminul owns a six-storey house in Dhaka's Uttara from where he conducts his business activities.

Around 2,500 rural underprivileged women in Shailakupa used to make a living by making embroideries for him. But in recent times, after the novel coronavirus pandemic broke out, his orders fell to as low as Tk 10 lakh per month. Now, and around one thousand of the women are still employed at his workshop.

Aminul said as he wants to continue supporting the underprivileged families in his village home through his work, he has been trying to regain sales by selling the merchandise from his online store on Facebook (www.facebook.com/banglaseleyai).

He and his wife Snigdha Islam live in Dhaka. They have a boy and a girl.

AFTERMATH OF CYCLONE YAAS IN PATUAKHALI

Drinking water scarce in eight upazilas

SOHRAB HOSSAIN, Patuakhali

Thousands in seven out of eight upazilas in Patuakhali district are under the risk of acquiring diarrhoea and other water-borne illnesses as tidal waters inflicted by cyclone Yaas left at least 715 deep tube wells in the region damaged.

The deep tube wells are located in 232 villages in the upazilas where inhabitants rely on those for freshwater as groundwater there has high levels of salinity.

Out of the damaged deep tube wells, 121 were damaged completely and 594 sustained partial damage, according to Public Health Engineering Department (PHED) in Patuakhali.

PHED Department Executive Engineer Faysal Ahmed said the tube wells got damaged after seawater from the Bay of Bengal inundated the tube wells when the cyclone swept through the coast.

The worst affected upazila is Baulal where 305 deep tube wells have been damaged. The second worst affected is Kalapara, with 241 damaged.

In other upazilas, 67 deep tube wells have been damaged in Rangabali, 45 in Sadar, 34 in Galachipa, 15 in Dashmina and 8 in Mirzaganj, he said, adding that work was underway to repair the tube wells as early as possible.

Jayanti Rani Dutta, assistant health inspector in Kalapara upazila, said residents in the affected villages are in dire need of potable water after sandy seawater submerged the tube wells in those areas.

People in these areas are already suffering from various water-borne diseases including diarrhoea and the situation might worsen with such a large number of deep tube wells gone out of commission overnight, she added.

The only deep tube well in Kuakata fishing village under Kalapara upazila also went out of order after the storm. Its handle has been lost and its pipeline has been clogged with sand and seawater.

Fisherman Sumon Sheikh, a resident of the village, said the tube well was the only source of potable water for more than 100 people, from 20 families, living in the village.

But with the tube well going out of service, their life would be quite difficult, as they would need to walk half a kilometre to fetch safe drinking water from a distant location, he also said.

Shawkat Hossain Biswas, chairman of Lala Union Parishad in the upazila, said



Cyclonic storm Yaas tore up the coast of Bangladesh and India during late May, but a deep tube well, in Nimdee launch terminal area of Patuakhali's Baulal upazila, was found still inundated partially in tidal waters last week.

PHOTO: SOHRAB HOSSAIN

as a seven kilometre stretch from Nawapara to Charipara, along the Ramanabad river, does not have any embankment, 11 villages in the union were completely inundated by tidal waters as high as five feet.

The seawater has receded from the area, but residents are in desperate need of hygienic potable water as the storm has rendered all the deep tube wells out of order, he also said, seeking urgent assistance of departments concerned in restoring the freshwater sources for residents of the affected areas.



The Daily Star

Girls Get Equal Freedom in Public Spaces: Safer Cities Campaign 2021

The Daily Star and Plan International Bangladesh jointly organised an online roundtable meeting titled "Involving Adolescent Girls in Decision Making to Ensure Safer Cities", as part of the Girls Get Equal Freedom in Public Spaces: Safer Cities Campaign 2021 on May 30, 2021. Here we publish a summary of the discussion.

Dr. Ferdousi Begum, Lead of Sexual and Reproductive Health Rights (SRHR), Plan International Bangladesh

As the world rapidly turns urban, Bangladesh is listed among countries that will soon contribute most to the global urban population. Bangladesh, home to 160 million people, is one of the most densely populated countries in the world. The size of the urban population in Bangladesh is 53 million. Bangladesh's urban landscapes have also been constructed without considering girls/women's needs in the design process. With an estimated 70 out of every 100 people in Bangladesh expected to live in a city in 2050, the lack of safe urban areas for girls and women will become an even more critical issue.

The Safer Cities for Girls is a global program of Plan International, which is currently being implemented in eight cities of eight countries and will scale up to 20 countries in next few years. During the country strategy period (2021 – 2030) Plan International Bangladesh will implement safer city program for girls and young women to tackle the unequal power relations and challenge harmful social norms that perpetuate the insecurity and exclusion of girls and young women in cities.

Advocacy to the government related authorities and organizations is the key to Plan's safer city initiatives for accommodating girls' voices to provide them safe, reliable, sustainable facilities (i.e. safe transport, open spaces, roads, sanitations etc.), and also to increase their active and meaningful participation in urban development and governance.

So, through this roundtable meeting Plan International Bangladesh would like to understand the obstacles and gaps that need to be addressed in order to ensure safer cities for girls.

Mayabe Arannya, Team Lead of Peer Education, Kotha

When talking about safer spaces for women, I think one of the first things we need to address is the gender norms in our society. It is not just an issue of physical safety, but also about changing societal norms, our mindsets, and attitudes.

We have to understand that creating safe spaces alone is not going to solve the issue. Because how can we really discuss safety when society and our families believe that the only space for women is inside their homes?

Another issue that comes to mind is, when we have conversations about safe spaces for women, it's either for work or education. But why don't we consider that women can also go out just for their own pleasure?

I think the first step towards combatting these societal norms would be a well-funded



Dr. Ferdousi Begum



Mayabe Arannya



Tasnim Odrika



Morium Nesa



Shamima Begum



Dr. Jaynal Hoque



Md. Akhtaruzzaman



Brig Gen Md Jobaidur Rahman



Asa Torkelsson



Selim Reza

and organised behavioural change campaign.

Tasnim Odrika, Journalist, The Daily Star

A lot of the things that we are going to talk about seem very obvious. But even then, they have not been addressed adequately. I think first we need to look at the state of transportation. Ensuring safe public transport is essential to ensure that women can continue to pursue opportunities in education as well as on a professional level.

Unless you're from a privileged background and can afford the cost of safer transportation, you may find yourself turning down great opportunities. Thinking of it from my own perspective, there have often been days when I've had to dread commuting to work simply because I did not have my car.

It's very common for workplaces to boast about the number of female employees that they hire. But are they really doing enough to ensure proper facilities are in place for these women commuting to their workplaces? I think employers can contribute a lot in ensuring safer spaces for women.

Morium Nesa, Manager, Women's Rights and Gender Equity, ActionAid Bangladesh

In 2017, we conducted a study about women facing violence in public spaces. In this study, we found that almost 57 percent of women avoided reporting instances of violence because they were afraid of people not supporting or believing them if they reported such an issue. They were worried that people will ask them why they were in that area or

wearing a particular kind of outfit. According to this survey 47.5 percent of women in urban areas in Bangladesh felt unsafe in public places like markets, streets and public transport while 88 percent reported facing harassment by pedestrians, passengers of public transport and buyers in market places. What was worse, about 81 percent of women, preferred not to seek help from law enforcement agencies fearing further harassment. Government policy in Bangladesh does not adequately tackle this issue, with no specific laws to combat sexual harassment in public spaces.

Shamima Begum, Joint Commissioner, Dhaka Metropolitan Police

A key priority should be to increase the visibility in areas where women are more vulnerable, by setting up more streetlights and surveillance cameras. This will deter perpetrators from harassing women.

Girls and Young Women can call 999 to avail help from the police. Female police officers primarily work in the call centres. People should also keep note of our victim support centres and mobile apps.

Bangladesh Police Inspector General (IGP) Benazir Ahmed has divided every thana into beats. Each beat has a designated sub-inspector level officer responsible for maintaining communication with local people and keeping the area secure. I would request all girls and young women to keep the contact number of their respective beat police officer and reach out to them for any help.

marriage. Boys are part of sessions on eve-teasing and drug abuse.

Md. Akhtaruzzaman, UN-Habitat Representative, Bangladesh

There is a lack of coordination and appropriate decision-making. Decentralisation is required in the decision-making process so we can hold more people accountable.

The Safer Cities campaign, launched in 1996, is a concern of UN-Habitat. It has been implemented in 77 cities so far. In reality, we have not made much progress in this regard in Bangladesh. The primary issue is unplanned city development. Due to unplanned development in Dhaka and surrounding cities, it has become challenging to introduce the provisions of the Safer Cities campaign. Female RMG and domestic workers should be included in all plans for safer cities since they need to go out daily for work.

Brigadier General Md Jobaidur Rahman, Chief Health Officer, Dhaka North City Corporation

Dhaka is a very unplanned city and it is highly dense. Almost 4,900 people live per square kilometre. Every day, 12,000 to 14,000 people are moving towards Dhaka City. 37 to 38 percent of our total population is based in Dhaka and it is predicted that it will reach a peak of almost 50 percent by 2050.

We are making efforts in protecting maternal and child health by offering comprehensive and quality child and maternal health services from the clinics under City Corporation.

Asa Torkelsson, UNFPA Bangladesh

UNFPA is working with the intention to provide safer public spaces. Bangladesh has made commendable advances in gender equality and women's empowerment. Yet the level of gender-based violence is very high.

We have set up women's help desks in police stations and courts. We have also set up helplines called Alapon Helpline to provide counselling services for gender-based violence and SRHR. Virtual safety is an important issue too. We must scale up our efforts to reduce cyberbullying, cyberstalking and other such toxic and dangerous behaviours.

Selim Reza, CEO, Dhaka North City Corporation

No civilisation can flourish without the participation of women in it. Women today are involved in different sectors in Bangladesh. We are providing clinical services at the rural level.

The SDGs include women's empowerment and adolescence development. We are working to reduce early marriage. We have enforced laws to stop child marriage. We are doing our best to provide security to our girls and hope in the future we will be able to create a safer city for them.