

Let our rural women rise and claim their rights



SHAHEEN ANAM

OUT of a population of over 160 million in Bangladesh, approximately 107 million people live in rural areas. Of them, at least 50 million are women and girls. They form the backbone of the rural economy, working tirelessly—often 16 hours a day—for the well-being of their families, as per research. Yet, they remain invisible and undervalued, not given the dignity that they deserve.

October 15 marked the International Day of Rural Women. The day was first observed by the United Nations in 2008, in recognition of their contribution to promoting rural development, maintaining food security, and addressing poverty within societies and families. At the global level, rural women produce 60-80 percent of basic foodstuff in sub-Saharan Africa and the Caribbean, and they are involved in over 50 percent of labour in rice cultivation in Asia. Rural women perform 30 percent of the agricultural work in industrialised countries, head 60 percent of households as single mothers, and also meet 90 percent of water and fuel needs in many regions of Asia and Africa. Despite that, 500 million rural women in the world live below the poverty line.

This year, there is a call for rural women to rise and claim their rights to sustainable development, which is timely and necessary. It is well-recognised that the Sustainable Development Goals (SDG) agenda will not be achieved without ensuring the rights, entitlements, and security of women. The call is relevant in the context of the urgency to address climate change impacts and ensure sustainable development. It urges rural women to take control over their lives, assert their position in families and society, and be part of the decision-making process that often eludes them. For that to happen, society and families must undergo a change in mindset and attitude, and recognise that rural women are nation builders and should be valued and respected.

While it is well-known that women in all groups across Bangladesh suffer from various

forms of abuse and neglect, the women and girls in rural areas suffer disproportionately from poverty, negative social norms and practices, discrimination within households, and a lack of empowerment in most spheres. Research indicates that poverty rates in rural areas across most regions are higher than those in urban areas, impacting women disproportionately. In Bangladesh, women may be as productive and enterprising as their male counterparts, but they do not have equal access to land, credit, agricultural inputs,

destroyed the livelihoods of millions and shattered the social fabric of societies. In Bangladesh, women and children have borne the brunt of the pandemic. Besides health and financial crises, domestic violence has increased, and so have early marriage and child labour. Their double burden of responsibilities has increased manifold during this time. Rural women are very much a part of the effort to rebuild the economy and require incentives, support and monetary assistance, like their male counterparts.

and natural disasters disproportionately.

In Bangladesh, women's participation in agriculture has grown tremendously in the last 15 years—so has their contribution to the rural economy. Rural women play an important role in various income-generating activities through agriculture, which includes various pre- and post-harvesting activities such as selection of seeds, harvesting, storing of crops, etc. Women working in paddy fields is now a common sight, especially in the northern parts of Bangladesh. According to estimates, women contribute 25-50 percent of household income in rural families, and are involved in 48 percent of agriculture-related work. Even then, women are invisible in the agricultural sector of Bangladesh, owing to the assumption that they are not capable of physical labour needed for agricultural production.

Rural women ensure household food security for their families. Household vegetable gardening, rearing of poultry and cattle—all contribute to maintaining their health and nutrition. They use whatever means possible to put some cooked food on the table; usually the last to eat, they make sure their families, no matter how poor they are, are fed at least two meals a day. A famous quote by Sir Fazle Hasan Abed is, "Women in Bangladesh are the best managers in the world because they manage poverty." The quote needs no explanation, and that is why Sir Abed, through Brac, targeted rural women as the primary beneficiaries of its programmes.

Rural women's role as climate actors is no less significant, especially in land and natural resource management and building climate resilience. A recent study reveals that the role of women in the use, management, and conservation of the environment can be an entry point to build an economically viable and ecologically sustainable environment system in rural Bangladesh.

It is, therefore, time for rural women to come out of seclusion and claim their rightful place as nation builders and a major force in the economy of Bangladesh. Has anyone ever realised that much of the internationally acclaimed success of food self-sufficiency in Bangladesh is due to the "behind the scene" contribution of rural women? Then why

should they not be given the status of farmers? Why should they remain "assistants" of farmers? Thailand introduced the legal term "women farmer" to allow women access to agricultural credit. As farmers, women will be entitled to get Krishi Card (agriculture card), enabling them to access agriculture inputs such as fertilisers, technical expertise, and other assets at lower rates than the market prices.

However, for such changes to take place, clear national guidelines, strategies, and plans need to be formulated and implemented. This includes the promotion of women's literacy, training in nutrition and health, and supporting women's participation in key decision-making positions, particularly as they pertain to the access to land and resources. The issue of land ownership should also be seriously considered. According to a study by economist Dr Abul Barkat with the Association of Land Reform and Development (ALRD), 95 percent of women in Bangladesh do not own land. Land ownership is a huge step towards women empowerment, which will boost their confidence, self-worth, and dignity. Steps should be taken to reduce the double work burden on women. Development plans must have the budget to set up childcare centres in rural areas, efficient cooking stoves, and water collecting systems. Most importantly, the male members of the family should come out of their social norms and practices and assist women in their household chores.

With Bangladesh poised to become a middle-income country by 2040, and the personal commitment of the prime minister to empower all women, it is high time the contribution of rural women was recognised as the productive force that it is. Rural women and girls are waiting to be included as the essential part of the growth and progress taking place in Bangladesh today. They should no longer work behind the scenes as assistants to men, or live as second-class members of their families. Now is the time for them to rise, raise their collective voices, and claim their rights as equal partners to ensure sustainable development.

Shaheen Anam is executive director of Manusher Jonno Foundation.



Rural women are nation builders; they're the backbone of our rural economy.

FILE PHOTO: SK ENAMUL HAQ

markets, etc. Subsequently, most of women's work in agriculture remains invisible and is lumped under "shongsharer kaaj" (household work). Laws, policies, and social practices don't support women's ownership of assets and property. Rural girls and women are more likely to be married off before the legal age of 18 years, are unable to complete their education, have fewer opportunities for employment, and generally remain bound to social norms that assign them the prescribed roles of homemaker and caregiver of their families.

The ongoing Covid-19 pandemic has

Structural barriers and negative social norms continue to constrain women's decision-making ability and participation. Due to discriminatory practices in most households, women and girls in rural areas lack equal access to productive resources, assets, and public services such as education, healthcare, and infrastructure, including water and sanitation. Globally, with few exceptions, every gender and development indicator reveals that rural women fare worse than rural men and urban women, and experience poverty, exclusion, impacts of climate change

Whom do the public servants serve?



CHINTITO SINCE 1995
NIZAMUDDIN AHMED

UNLIKE the English language, where the hierarchy of age is muddled in the universality of "you," Bangla distinguishes age, endearment, and insult with the terms "tui," "tumi," and "apni"—not in that order—as do several other dialects of the subcontinent. The colonial tongue has further allowed

the shrewd Bangalees to confuse both "shala" and "dulabhai" with the dualism of "brother-in-law." The recipient feels honoured, because he assumes he has been addressed as the husband of an elder sister, whereas the sly guy might have meant otherwise.

The all-encompassing "uncle" really does not do justice to four distinct relationships—*mama*, *chacha*, *khalu*, and *fupa*—in the masculine genre. Parallely, we have *mami*, *chachi*, *khala*, and *fupu*.

Life at unclesdom begins with a shock. Most of us perhaps remember the first time we were addressed so. Soon, we were upgraded to *chachchu*. Then came *chacha*, before life departed to *nana* or *dada* cloud, just briefly pausing at *nana/dada bhai*. In contrast, John could live forever as an uncle.

Without delving into the idiosyncratic behaviour of a public servant that circulated in the news recently, one should ask why she lost her temper when a citizen addressed her as "apa" (sister) at her office.

In the public domain of Bangladesh, *apa* is the most common, respectable, perhaps the safest, and most widely accepted interpersonal address of an elder sister; the male counterpart would, of course, be *bhai*. Elder blood sisters and lady acquaintances, even younger ones, are addressed as *apa*.

Success has seemingly turned the aforementioned public servant's young head, because, according to press reports, she double-decked her arrogance by asking the service-seeking

citizen to address her as *ma* (an affectionate term to refer to daughters in Bengali culture) instead. To qualify for that measure of paternal love from the 45-year-old man, the on-the-job BCS officer would have to be in her early 20s!

"It is normal that someone of his age would address me as his daughter. Otherwise, it shows that he has a 'bad character'. I will obviously object to a man who has one foot in his grave addressing me as 'sister,'" she said to explain her reaction (*Dhaka Tribune*, October 5, 2021).

Oops! Now, that's a triple deck of uncivil behaviour that should have been rectified during

of the public? *Shaheb? Madam? Apa? Bhai?* Did the Burichang upazila nirbahi officer (UNO) address her so-called father figure as "sir" that day? Or *baba* (father)? Respect has to be reciprocal, which I assume that the public officials are not taught at the training institute for the public sector, because that is common sense from Class 3.

We observe a host of special days. On the occasion of National Public Service Day in 2018, Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina had asked public servants to shun the "red tape culture" and pick the work that would be beneficial for the country and its people. The spirit of the prime minister's



The core responsibility of civil servants is to serve the people of the country.

FILE PHOTO: STAR

an officer's grooming. Training must have been overloaded with telekinetic psychiatry, if by the simple utterance of "apa," one's personality and character could be determined.

In her defence, the tone is vital in deciphering the attitude of the gentleman. Did he say "aaaapu," or was it "apuuuuuu"? Otherwise, there is absolutely nothing wrong with respectfully calling a lady *apa* or *bom* (sister)—just as *bhai*, *bhaiya*, and *bhaijan* are more than fine.

The episode brings to light a pertinent question. How do civil servants address members

appeal was echoed as recently as on October 6 this year, when she "stressed the importance of good governance and asked the government officials to devote themselves to serving people to make this society a better place."

Getting upset at how one is addressed is understandable, but judging someone's reputation and abusing them are grave misdemeanours that are reflectively opposite to what the prime minister stressed when she was speaking to civil service officers. "I hope you will devote yourselves to serving people, remaining faithful to the

constitutional responsibilities," she had said. Three absolute gems of words were cited: service, faithfulness, and constitution.

Somehow, government officials need to be reminded of this annually, if not monthly or even often. But why? They are some of the best sons and daughters of the soil, soaked in the blood of the martyrs and the injured, whose dignity they have solemnly vowed to uphold.

In her most recent meeting with them, Sheikh Hasina gave a stern reminder that as per the constitution, people are the owners of the country and the government employees are bound to serve the people round the clock. Is that too complicated to comprehend? Two more gems were mentioned: ownership and obligation.

The officers of state administration go through a rigorous selection process, followed by continuous training and mentoring by seniors—if they care to listen. Then why get perturbed by the sound—nay, noise—of *apa*?

A reasonable individual would have said in a flat pitch, without raising their voice because of their extensive education and given responsibility, "Sir/Bhai/Shahab, it is not befitting in an office environment to call me *apa* in that tone" (if the man, with "one foot in his grave," had indeed dressed his address with a lecherous attitude).

Now I am not a cool person by any definition—lesser so in my younger days. I recall in shame an incident about two decades ago. At the Katabon crossing, I was hand-signalled by a traffic policeman to stop. I did, but I might have overdriven a bit due to momentum. He came rushing towards me, waving a *danda* in his hand. I was alone in the car, and uncontrollable. Fuming at his action, I opened the door and stepped out, but with only one foot on the road—just in case, you know. I shouted at him, "Why are you showing me your *lathi*?" Luckily, the police *bhai* was well-trained, and did not hit me. More fortunately, the light turned green.

Dr Nizamuddin Ahmed is an architect, a Commonwealth scholar and a fellow, a Baden-Powell fellow scout leader, and a Major Donor Rotarian.

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QUOTABLE Quote

GEORGE HENRY LEWES
(1817 - 1878)
English philosopher

Originality is independence, not rebellion; it is sincerity, not antagonism.

CROSSWORD BY THOMAS JOSEPH

ACROSS

- 1 Cleared tables
- 6 Court sport
- 11 Foreword
- 12 Cupid's missile
- 13 Burglar's bane
- 14 Keyed up
- 15 Subs
- 17 Lend a hand
- 18 — out a living
- 19 "No, No" girl
- 22 — Plaines
- 23 Homes
- 24 Physics bits
- 25 2021
- 26 Masters champ Matsuyama
- 27 Keg need
- 30 Adapted from
- 31 "Do — say!"

DOWN

- 1 Partial
- 2 Different
- 3 Asserts
- 4 Screws up
- 5 Held sway
- 6 Topper
- 7 Smelter's supply
- 8 Highly
- 9 Suggests
- 10 Nobel, for one
- 16 "Lolita" writer
- 20 Picked by the party
- 21 Mag. workers
- 24 Sports drink suffix
- 25 Saluted
- 26 Vacation spot
- 27 James Clavell book
- 28 Lend a hand
- 29 Components
- 30 Sweet raisin cake
- 34 Folk learning
- 36 Fabric color
- 37 Anvil's place

decorative

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YESTERDAY'S ANSWERS

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| P | O | P | U | P | G | O | L | D | A | | |
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BEETLE BAILEY by Mort Walker

BABY BLUES by Kirkman & Scott