16 DAYS OF ACTIVISM AGAINST GENDER-BASED VIOLENCE

To end gendered violence, we must look beyond the binary lens

ABDULLAH TITIR

WE find ourselves at the outro to yet another year, and the world has to keep reminding itself, like a broken record, that all of this violence against women must stop. That is precisely this year's rallying cry—"End violence against women now!"—that we chant, as women's rights activists, feminists, human rights defenders, civil society actors, artists, and individuals across the globe come together to share and reflect, to question, to mobilise, to strategise, and to continue to step up to end violence against women. Bangladesh is no stranger to this show of global solidarity, as people at home have taken to the streets and social media alike, to participate in the ongoing 16 Days of Activism against Gender-Based Violence campaign and speak up against abuse and oppression, demand accountability and better protection, and advocate for equality and non-discrimination.

However, since the understanding of gender in Bangladesh is still very binary, most calls for eliminating gender-based violence continue to demand strengthened protection for women. Most initiatives on furthering gender equality are centred on reducing inequalities between men and women, or more specifically, between the "male" and "female" sexes. For most things to be considered "gender-inclusive" in Bangladesh, the first question many would ask is whether services, languages, institutions and the infrastructure, transportation, administration, government agencies, workplaces, places of worship, and public amenities, among other things, are "women friendly." And if they are, then benchmarks for gender equality may have well been met. Of course, we must ensure that existing legal and institutional frameworks and processes do not discriminate against women, justice mechanisms and social protections are available and accessible, and women's voices are amplified across communities and in decision-making spaces.

However, to be truly gender-inclusive is to accept and celebrate all diverse gender identities. This starts with discarding the binary constructions of gender and gender identity, and looking beyond conventional definitions. This starts with not relegating transgender individuals to the sidelines while we take 16 days out of the year to specifically focus on activism against gender-based violence. This starts with fighting discrimination with approaches that are intersectional and acknowledge people in all their diversities.

It is not possible to achieve gender equality if we set out to only even the scales between men and women, without also focusing attention on individuals who identify outside of this binary (and may call themselves gender non-conforming or gender-diverse), or individuals whose gender identities and expressions do not conform to the sex they were assigned at birth (transgender women and men) and the typical gender norms and social expectations that may arise out of such an assignment. Gender-based violence in Bangladesh is deeply rooted in gender inequality, which is created and perpetuated by patriarchal social norms, gender stereotyping, and unequal distributions of power, leading to the lack of agency and independence and a persisting culture of silence and impunity. Within this limiting context, it is extremely important to recognise and talk about the rights of transgender, hijra, and other gender-diverse individuals, marginalised because of their gender identity, to have freedom from and protection against violence and discrimination, and to have equal and inclusive access to basic necessities and services as citizens of this country.

For people who are gender-diverse, including transgender individuals, and members of the hijra community in Bangladesh (specific communities of transgender women and gender-diverse individuals who are part of the long-standing hijra tradition, and have their own language, profession, and customs rooted in this tradition), the violence, discrimination, and stigma are multifold and underlined by prejudice and misconceptions about gender, gender identity, sexuality, and the human body. Although the government has attempted to give legal recognition to diverse gender identities, through a 2014 gazette by the Ministry of Social Welfare which recognises the hijra community as the 'hijra gender,' the flaw in this recognition is its exclusionary approach. Founded on a lack of proper understanding of the hijra identity and culture, it fails to appreciate the ways in which gender identity is nuanced and diverse. It does not set out what recognition actually entails for hijra community members, and it completely leaves out gender-diverse and gender non-conforming individuals, including transgender men and women, who are not part of the hijra tradition. In the absence, therefore, of conversations around gender, identity, and diversity, and recognition and identification processes that are inclusive and implemented effectively, the othering of gender-diverse individuals starts within their own families, and is further perpetuated by society and the state, and the existing structures in which these operate. Discrimination on the basis of gender identity is pervasive, resulting in obstacles to the free expression of gender and access to basic rights and necessities, such as education, healthcare (including mental health support and gender-affirming healthcare), inheritance, housing, employment opportunities, and legal support and protection against violence.

A truly gender-inclusive society must recognise and fairly treat all gender identities. FILE PHOTO: **SK ENAMUL HAQ**

The existing laws and policies that address gender-based violence and discrimination are framed in heteronormative terms. For example, the Penal Code, 1860, the Women and Children Repression Prevention Act, 2000, and the Domestic Violence (Prevention and Protection) Act, 2010, all of which provide significant protections for women against different forms of sexual and gender-based violence, recognise only cisgender women—who fit into the strictly binary framework of gender—as victims and survivors of violence. Since these laws are not gender-affirming, transgender women and men as well as the members of hijra community are completely excluded from the scope of legal protection offered by these laws. The criminal justice system similarly reinforces existing heteronormative structures, which means that the courts and legal processes, and other institutional frameworks, are not gender-inclusive, preventing gender-diverse individuals from speaking up and reporting violence and discrimination based on their gender identities.

Service providers, including law enforcement agencies and those providing emergency services (such as Victim Support Centres and One-Stop Crisis Centres) and legal support, are not gender-sensitive or gender-responsive, lacking the understanding of gender diversity and the specific ways in which violence and discrimination against gender-diverse individuals occur, and lacking the appropriate resources to address these concerns. Shelter homes are also unable to house members of hijra and transgender communities facing sexual and gender-based violence—again because they do not conform to conventional and binary expressions of gender. These heteronormative and exclusionary frameworks interact to put up immense barriers in terms of access to justice for gender-diverse individuals, only compounded by the absence of any laws and policies expressly addressing and protecting the rights of all gender-diverse individuals, and the lack of an anti-discrimination law to challenge and address discrimination on the basis of gender identity. This also creates particular vulnerabilities for those with lower socioeconomic backgrounds, and encourages further marginalisation and exposure to violence.

In recent years, the government has taken some progressive steps towards protection and social inclusion of hijra community members, providing monthly allowances, scholarships, and skills and capacity development training. However, these steps have not been enough or effective in reducing inequalities faced by the hijras, simply because of their gender identity; nor have these created inclusive spaces for other gender-diverse individuals. The starting point for this would be to enable proper legal recognition of gender identity and make identification processes inclusive for all diverse identities. The next immediate step would be the enactment and implementation of an anti-discrimination law that recognises diverse gender identity as a basis for discrimination, and prohibits and punishes such discrimination, which could be further taken up through gender-affirming reforms in other laws, policies, and institutional practices that enable gender-diverse individuals to challenge discrimination and secure justice against violence. Any steps taken to reduce violence and discrimination based on gender must also extend to unequivocally recognising and protecting the human rights of gender-diverse individuals.

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Mainstreaming nature-based solutions into development in Bangladesh

HASEEB MD IRFANULLAH

ON November 13, 2021, the two-week 26th United Nations Climate Change Conference, or COP26, ended in Scotland with the participating nations agreeing upon the Glasgow Climate Pact. Since carbon emission reduction and climate finance were the top COP agenda, decisions on phasing out inefficient fossil fuel subsidies, phasing down coal power, and increasing adaptation funds by developed countries, for example, are noted as successes in this COP.

In recent years, nature-based solutions (NbS) gained significant momentum in climate conversations. It is, therefore, no surprise that the Glasgow pact repeatedly highlights the need for protecting, conserving and restoring diverse ecosystems to fight climate change. In the simplest terms, NbS means working with nature to tackle our societal problems, such as poverty, food insecurity, and of course climate crisis, while ensuring both human and biodiversity benefits.

On December 24, 2020, I wrote in this column how Bangladesh explored NbS last year amid Covid-19. Now, let's look back at 2021, at how the country has been mainstreaming NbS. And let's see what opportunities await us in 2022. Let's explore these along four interconnected threads: planning, practice, capacity development, and knowledge.

Over the last two years, we have seen a good number of analyses on how ecosystem-based approaches—or NbS, for that matter—are sufficiently represented in Bangladesh's short-term (e.g. 7th and 8th Five-Year Plans), medium-term (e.g. Perspective Plan of Bangladesh 2021–2041; the revised Nationally Determined Contributions, or NDC 2021, to reduce the country's carbon emission by 2030), and long-term plans (e.g. Bangladesh Delta Plan 2100). Although the term NbS has not been explicitly mentioned in these planning instruments, the action points outlined there are very much in line with the principles and scopes of NbS.

In terms of practice, Bangladesh has long been implementing NbS in various ecosystems. For example, we have been practising floating agriculture for the last couple of hundred years, we have been creating green belts along our coastlines since 1966, and we have been managing our forests and wetlands with local communities over the last couple of decades. Currently, the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) and the Bangladesh government are designing a project for Tanguar Haor management. This will be a follow-up of the government's 12-year effort to conserve this globally important wetland with local people and administration. The envisaged scope of this project and the ongoing conversations show that this USD 21.6 million project will be taking a comprehensive approach to mainstream NbS for sustainably managing Tanguar Haor.

Since September 2014, the Asian Development Bank (ADB) has been supporting the implementation of Coastal Towns Environmental Infrastructure Project (CTEIP). This USD 103.5 million project is making the infrastructure at 10 municipalities in Bagerhat, Barguna, Bhola, Patuakhali, and Pirojpur districts disaster- and climate-resilient. This year, the ADB has started designing the second phase of this project. So far, urban NbS has been practised to a limited scale in Bangladesh, besides the green spaces in different towns and cities. Nevertheless, restoring natural drainage systems, reviving the lost riparian vegetations, and protecting and creating the mangroves around the coastal towns can fill in the current gaps in urban NbS. The increasing interest of ADB in NbS indicates that the second phase of the CTEIP could be a flagship project that mainstreams NbS into Bangladesh's climate-vulnerable municipalities.

The conservation of Tanguar Haor is a prime example of the nature-based solutions (NbS) Bangladesh has been implementing to build disaster and climate resilience. PHOTO: **SAKIB AHMED**

Regarding capacity development on NbS, over the last year or so, Bangladesh Planning Commission, in association with UNDP, has been providing training to mid-level to senior government officials in a relatively new concept named Disaster Impact Assessment (DIA). One of the sessions of this training discusses the role of NbS in building disaster resilience. This gives the participants an opportunity to learn about NbS, and how Bangladesh has been implementing it to reduce disaster risks in different contexts. Recently, a training manual was prepared on DIA, which includes NbS and thus expands the capacity development opportunity on NbS.

In recent months, to improve risk management in development projects, the Establishment of National Academy for Development Administration (2nd Revised) Project has organised capacity-building events for project management leadership at government agencies ranging from local government, agriculture and EPZs to housing, power and education. The training includes a session on NbS, which links ecosystems with climate resilience, shares basic concepts of NbS, and showcases how Bangladesh can implement NbS in different sectors, such as forestry, disaster risk management and urban development, and how we can follow global standards to make our NbS effective. These training sessions are crucial to mainstream NbS both into policy and practice.

Finally, let's look at our efforts to create knowledge on NbS. In 2021, six researchers from the University of Oxford, International Centre for Climate Change and Development (ICCCAD), and University of Liberal Arts Bangladesh (ULAB) analysed 56 peer-reviewed journal articles and final reports from USAID-supported the MACH (1998–2007) and the CREL (2013–2018) projects, the CBA-ECA project of the Department of Environment (2010–2015), and SDC-supported Tanguar Haor project (2006–2016). Their research, published this November in the journal *Frontiers in Environmental Science*, shows a wide range of benefits we get from diverse NbS interventions practised in Bangladesh, the factors that make these NbS effective, and possible future actions. The authors concluded that "Bangladesh has an opportunity to lead the way in showing how high quality NbS can be deployed at landscape scale to tackle sustainable development challenges in low- to middle-income countries, supporting a Green Economic Recovery," since the world is recovering from the Covid-19 pandemic.

This first-ever review on Bangladesh's NbS fills in the knowledge gap identified during a learning hub event organised by Bangladesh Planning Commission and ICCCAD on March 15, 2020, just before Bangladesh went into lockdown. The article now creates a modest basis to further adopt NbS in our development planning and project design and implementation.

As we move towards 2022, we can take three immediate actions to advance NbS mainstreaming. First, Bangladesh is currently preparing the National Adaptation Plan (NAP) with technical support from UNDP. This gives us an amazing opportunity to effectively embrace NbS by making it a core element of the NAP. Second, the government is now updating its Development Project Proforma (DPP). The existing DPP clearly guides new projects to consider environmental sustainability, climate change, biodiversity, and ecosystem services. It is high time to adopt the global NbS standards and guidelines in the revised DPP, making our development projects NbS-friendly. Third, we need a comprehensive database to help us select suitable NbS interventions for specific regions to address location-specific societal challenges. The existing NbS Bangladesh Network can be an important platform for creating such a repository and decision-making tool.

It will take a while to understand if the decisions made in COP26 are being carried out or not. But Bangladesh must maintain the momentum it has created to mainstream NbS into its development actions. We can only hope the others will catch up.

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QUOTABLE *Quote*

MARGARET MEAD
(1901 - 1978)
American anthropologist

Never doubt that a small group of thoughtful, committed citizens can change the world; indeed, it's the only thing that ever has.

CROSSWORD BY THOMAS JOSEPH

ACROSS
1 Nest insects
6 Walker's line
11 Devoured
12 Bewildered
13 Stock unit
14 Bottled buy
15 Aquarium fish
17 Luau strings
18 Hydrocarbon suffix
19 Speaks from memory
22 Blue
23 Horse restraint
24 Trait carriers
25 Llama's cousin
27 Chum
30 Not as narrow
31 Perfect serve
32 Bright beam
33 California mount
35 Home
38 Rocker John
39 Farm towers
40 Make recompense
41 Reads over
42 Was bold

DOWN
1 Squanders
2 Goddess of wisdom
3 On the sofa
4 Contented sound
5 Lead the way
6 Bar topic
7 LAX info
8 Keen
9 Harry Potter's Quidditch position
10 Fast runners
16 Medium sessions
20 Alertness
21 "— been swell!"
24 Transcript no.
25 Like our numerals
26 Lousiana university
27 Flock leader
28 Start of a play
29 Inclined
30 Copper alloy
34 Utah ski resort
36 Mafia head
37 Twisty turn

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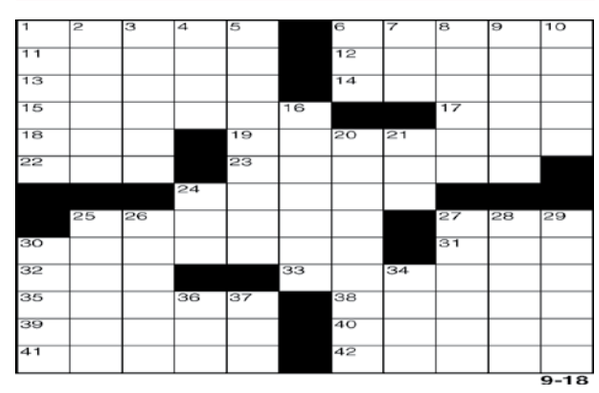

9-18

WEDNESDAY'S **ANSWERS**

A	F	T	E	R		A	R	E	N	A
L	O	R	N	A		D	O	V	E	R
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