

Why do we accept men's bad behaviour as 'culture'?



TASMIAH T RAHMAN

Tasmiah T Rahman is the head of the Skills Development Programme at Brac. This article is her own opinion and not her employer's.

AN article in this daily, titled "Women don't want to be superhumans" (published on February 2, 2022), has inspired me to write this column. The author, Afia Jahin, made valid points about how women are expected to be superhumans—juggling jobs, relationships, raising children and caring for the elderly in the family. Women's acceptance of grown-up men acting immature for their age, with widely used phrases like "boys will be boys," perhaps enables the latter. The other widely known stereotype is that men are "serious" at their jobs, and so women must be "family-oriented"—even if a woman is smarter than her spouse. These stereotypes continue to enable men's bad behaviour.

While travelling across Bangladesh for work, I often get to hear narratives similar to what Afia presented in her article. Women and girls think they have to "make sacrifices" for the greater good, that they have to "hold the fort" of family struggles, and take on tasks both at home and outside. These perceptions become the reality when people are asked about their future: most boys would say that their aspirations were to get ahead in life, choose the right career path and travel abroad, while the majority of girls would say they wanted to rear children and have happy family lives. But just as girls should aspire to be successful in their careers, shouldn't boys also aspire to grow up and be responsible fathers? Since boys

don't set family life as a priority, their attitude towards family life often results in entitled (read: bad) behaviour towards their spouses and children.

Unless we start teaching children—both boys and girls—that they all need to be responsible for their families and work together with their partners, these patriarchal notions will continue to hinder our growth, both as individuals and as a nation. A few real stories that I have heard over the years depict Afia's points clearly.

Exhibit A: Lisa (not her real name) has accepted that boys will be boys. Her mother and grandmother have convinced her that boys don't grow up—that they can get away with acting immature and not fulfilling their duties at home. So when she found out that her husband was having an affair with his co-worker, she accepted it. He was coming home late, looking at his phone most days and not paying any attention to their children. She was aware of the reality, but blamed herself for her husband's bad behaviour. Her own mother told her to stay quiet



ILLUSTRATION: YASKII

Our household "culture" of women doing everything has to change if we want them to move forward.

and pretend nothing happened. Even though Lisa studied economics, she got married and had children right after graduation. If she wanted to keep her dignity and move out with her children, who would take care of them? She had no prior work experience. She was afraid her husband wouldn't pay for their children's education if she left, and she would have to face hassle in society.

Exhibit B: Marufa's husband beats her, but at least she has a husband. She works as a housemaid and wanted to receive additional training to earn more. When asked how her relationship at home was, she bluntly said that her husband beat her once in a while. She seemed to be okay with it! Her relatives who live nearby in slums often intervene, she and her husband remain distant for a few days, but then everything goes back to normal. When asked why she endured this behaviour, Marufa explained that living in a slum without a husband meant that other men would be bothering her. According to her, women cannot live alone for safety reasons. Even though there are strict laws in that the

country against domestic abuse, she said they didn't matter in the slums. Complaining about him would increase problems for her, she said, as even law enforcers would be flirting with her. She cited a similar case of her friend, who raised her voice against her abusive husband, but got blamed for everything instead and had to leave the slum. In Marufa's world, society accepts that men can abuse their wives, and it's okay.

Exhibit C: Deepa's too beautiful to study after Class 10. Her parents fear that if she continues to go to school, the local goons who bother her may harm her even more. She used to get constantly harassed when she was in school, but she was able to complete her SSC examination. Now, her parents want her to marry a man who lives abroad, so that she can have a better future. But one of Deepa's cousins got married at the same age as her's and went abroad, only to return after two years with a child, abused. Deepa wants to continue her studies, complete her graduation and then get married. But she doesn't think her parents will allow that. Her father has made it very clear that unless a woman is married and has children, her duties remain unfulfilled.

Such are the cases of millions of girls in Bangladesh. While we understand that we have to treat our girls the same as our boys, we are failing to practise it in real life. In such circumstances, women have to stand up against such "bad behaviour." Men, too, need to understand that how our forefathers behaved in the family was not right, and our household "culture" has to change if we want women to move forward. The country's policy and practice should support women to become financially independent. Women are not superhumans, and they should stop accepting bad behaviour from men in society.

PROJECT SYNDICATE

China's Two Traps

KEUN LEE

Keun Lee, vice chair of the National Economic Advisory Council for the President of South Korea, is distinguished professor of economics at Seoul National University, and the author of "China's Technological Leapfrogging and Economic Catch-up: A Schumpeterian Perspective."

WHEN Deng Xiaoping launched China's strategy of "reform and opening up" in 1978, economists in the West had their doubts. In their view, a vibrant market economy was fundamentally incompatible with China's authoritarian political system. But many in the East—including Koreans like me, who witnessed the East Asian miracle while living under developmental dictatorship—were hopeful. Now that China is the world's second-largest economy, it seems clear that our optimism was warranted.

But, as China's economic slowdown suggests, the next phase of its development is rife with challenges. The country risks being ensnared by two traps: the "middle-income trap" (the tendency of fast-growing developing economies to lose momentum once they reach middle-income status), and the Thucydides Trap (when tensions between an insecure incumbent hegemon and a rising power lead to conflict). As I argue in my new book on China, global value chains (GVCs) are a key variable linking these two traps.

The middle-income trap is undoubtedly formidable, having ensnared Thailand, Turkey and Brazil, to name a few examples. It comes about partly because of the difficulty in building sufficient innovation capabilities to enable the economy to shift from low-wage activities to the production of higher value-added goods.

But China has positioned itself to avoid this pitfall. Already, the country's ratio of research-and-development spending to GDP is close to 2.5 percent—far above the average for upper-middle-income countries. As a result, China filed 28,680 US patents in 2021, ranked third after Japan (48,405), followed by South Korea (22,120) and Germany (15,334). And the government has made the continued development of China's innovative capabilities a top priority.

Beyond innovation, economic research has identified two other variables that determine whether a country can evade the middle-income trap: the presence of large world-class businesses, and the absence of excessive inequality. On the former variable, China is also doing very well. The number of Chinese companies in the Fortune Global 500 soared from 10 in 2000 to 135 in 2021, surpassing America's 122.

Inequality, however, remains a serious problem. China's Gini coefficient—a common measure of inequality, with zero representing absolute equality and one



representing absolute inequality—stands at nearly 0.42, much higher than, say, South Korea (0.30). The top 10 percent of the Chinese population own more than 40 percent of the country's pre-tax national income.

While these figures put China roughly on par with the US, they do not bode well for avoiding the middle-income trap. That said, China's government recognises the country's inequality problem and has committed to addressing it through the so-called common prosperity campaign.

As for the Thucydides Trap, although the US and China are not currently fighting a conventional war, they are locked in a tense competition—not least over GVCs. The US does not want to rely on value chains led by its rising challenger, so it has imposed tariffs and restrictions on Chinese exports, and banned many Chinese companies from accessing critical technologies—such as semiconductors.

While the US most likely cannot achieve comprehensive economic decoupling from China, it might be able to do so in high-tech sectors, including semiconductors, batteries, and artificial intelligence. This prospect has sent China's efforts to bolster its innovation

In terms of per capita income level, China has been gaining on the US by about one percentage point per year, reaching 27.7 percent of the US level last year. This suggests that China could reach 40 percent of the US' per capita GDP—high-income status—by 2033.

FILE PHOTO: REUTERS

capabilities into overdrive.

The push for decoupling has also disrupted China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), which was supposed to scale up GVCs, and driven China to attempt to source more intermediate goods locally. Many sectors—including automobiles, batteries, wind turbines, drones, and mobile phones—have embraced the "all made in China" ethos.

In any case, a partial decoupling from the US would not stop China's rise. Last year, China's GDP was 73.4 percent of the US level, with the share having risen by two percentage points annually for the preceding five years. At that rate, China will catch up with the US by 2035. In terms of per capita income level, China has been gaining on the US by about one percentage point per year, reaching 27.7 percent of the US level last year. This suggests that China could reach 40 percent of the US' per capita GDP—high-income status—by 2033.

But whether China achieves this depends upon several factors, including its ability to continue upgrading its global value chains and manage mounting internal risks. To counter the effects of external shocks—especially the Covid-19 pandemic—the Chinese government

eased credit conditions, lowered interest rates, and loosened local governments' control over fiscal expenditure. This has boosted corporate and local-government debt, fuelled shadow banking, and re-inflated the housing bubble.

Some of these developments, especially rising corporate debt and non-performing loans (NPLs), hark back to conditions in South Korea before the outbreak of the Asian financial crisis in the late 1990s. China is working hard to manage these risks, not least by postponing financial liberalisation.

But China's weak rule of law also carries serious risks, including official corruption, which tends to increase inequality and thus could undermine China's efforts to avoid the middle-income trap. In South Korea, democratisation played a central role in strengthening the rule of law and checking corruption, thereby enabling the country to reach high-income status.

Despite the "Beijing consensus," China has not yet developed a system that can support a similar transition. While China does not have to adopt the Western-style liberal democracy, it will need to devise a viable alternative, which might constitute a third trap facing China.