

‘Rural women should take up the protection of environment as a political agenda’

In conversation with Syeda Rizwana Hasan, Chief Executive, BELA

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The Daily Star (TDS): This year's theme is "Gender equality today for a sustainable tomorrow". What's the connection between gender equality and sustainability?
Syeda Rizwana Hasan: It is both an issue of equality and equity. It is an equity issue because women in almost every society remain backward. There needs to be positive discrimination to bring them forward in leadership, decision making, management and resource ownership.

The connection between gender equality and sustainability stems from the same factors that lead to both gender injustice and environmental injustice.

TDS: Women are said to be worse affected than men during a disaster. Why is it so?
Syeda Rizwana Hasan: When there are disasters in the coastal area, families are forced to take shelter away from the embankments where they live. However, after a few months, when the support and relief from the government or NGOs stop, men have to go and look for jobs in other areas, as their own area remain inundated. This makes the women even more vulnerable, lacking the safety a male-dominated household provides them in rural areas.

Simultaneously, women in coastal areas are also responsible for collecting water for their families. They have to walk 2-3 kilometres every day for

this purpose. On top of this, salinity intrusion forces them to drink saline water. As a consequence, pregnant women in coastal areas often suffer from eclampsia. Such natural disasters also ruin the livelihoods of women relying on agriculture and livestock.

TDS: What is the current state of the policies in terms of gender equality and what needs to be changed?
Syeda Rizwana Hasan: We do have laws and policies that try to address gender disparity and promote gender equality. The government's education policy is very supportive of female education. Activities in the health sector have helped decrease the maternity-related death of women.

However, if you look at the number of women involved in decision making in the government, the picture is different. While the 50 reserved seats for women is one side of the coin, we also have to see the number of women nominated by political parties to contest elections. There is a clear disparity here.

Simultaneously, gender-based violence (GBV) is also on the rise. Despite having clear laws against GBV, it is not being



addressed. We have also seen new forms of harassment against women, like cyber-bullying. I have been subjected to cyber-bullying myself. GBV, cyber-bullying and lack of representation in decision making are areas where we have not made notable improvements.

Even today, we use religion against women. We need to fight the fundamentalist idea that women cannot get an equal share of wealth and property as a man. Even other Islamic countries have amended their laws to give women access to equal inheritance, why can't we?

The evidence act must also be changed to ensure that the judicial process for rape victims is not intimidating. The British-era evidence law must be changed as it allows the police investigation process to be insensitive towards victims.

TDS: How can young women, who join fields such as environmental conservation and disaster risk management, be empowered?
Syeda Rizwana Hasan: When we started our activism, we did not have many figures to follow. So, we fought the battles.

This generation will have many idols from different sectors from whom they will be able to learn. However, each generation has its set of challenges. That is why women need to be focused and persistent. If you want to fight a battle without a solid knowledge base and practical experience, you will be defeated very soon.

TDS: How can we encourage women in rural areas and those working at the grassroots to contribute to climate protection and ensure sustainability in the process?
Syeda Rizwana Hasan: In a rural setting, nature brings you your livelihood. If nature is impacted, then you notice it almost immediately. Women in the rural areas should be recording all the negative changes that are happening around them and take up the protection of the environment as a political agenda. It is crucial to take it as a political agenda, as they have to challenge the activities that are negatively impacting their surroundings.

They must articulate their grievances and link them to their right to life and livelihood, and start negotiating to prevent these negative changes from continuing to take place. If that requires questioning a particular development project, then they have no other option than to be brave enough to unite against it.

The interview was taken by Aaqib Hasib

Karuna, a pioneer in SEED PRESERVATION



DIPANKAR ROY AND PINAKI ROY

Sitting in her narrow yard, Karuna Mandal was sorting watermelon seeds. Nearly a hundred plastic and earthen pots, wrapped in polythene and full of different kinds of seeds, lay in front of her.

"Today, it is a sunny day, so I am drying seeds and checking them out," she said. "Here, I have a total of 97 varieties of seeds, mostly those of fruits and vegetables."

This is the local *khudejaam*, meaning small berries, and that is custard apple and then pumpkin, bottle gourd, lady finger, brinjal, radish, spinach, she goes on.

Also, there are seeds of paddy like Balam, Rani Salut, Banashful and other grains, she said showing different pots.

Karuna is from the coastal village of Sukdara, a partially saline area by the Khulna-Naliyanroad, three and a half kilometres away from Katianangla bus stand, under Batiaghata Upazila in Khulna.

By preserving local varieties of seeds and doing organic farming, Karuna, a 52-year-old farmer, has become a role model to other women in the area. She grows vegetables without using chemical fertilisers and insecticides. Seeing Karuna, other women in the area also started organic farming.

Asked how she started, Karuna said, she has been preserving seeds for nearly 25 years. Since her marriage with Provash Mandal, Karuna began the practice as part of the tradition of farmers' families.

But later, she started in a more organised way in 2010, when she got an exposure tour to Rameharpur Union Parishad of Netrokona district by LoCOS, a non-government organisation, about the use of natural fertiliser and participation of women in cultivation.

Upon returning to her native village, she shared her knowledge with her husband and neighbours and actively participated in cultivation using local varieties.

Karuna Mandal
PHOTO:
DIPANKAR ROY

It [local variety of seed] is cheaper and more adaptable to the climate, while also producing higher yields than the hybrid seeds available in the market.

"It is very important to preserve local varieties of seeds as, in our saline-prone area other seeds do not grow well. I use these seeds for my cultivation and also distribute it to other farmers who need it," she said.

Asked why she takes the hassle of preserving seeds as she could buy them from the market, Karuna replies, "It is cheaper and more adaptable to the climate, while also producing higher yields than the hybrid seeds available in the market."

"Sometimes farmers are cheated by buying substandard seeds available in the market that is why I do not need to buy seeds from the market," she added.

There are at least 20 women in her village who have been preserving seeds and practicing organic farming, Karuna said. A local NGO organises a seed fair every year. Women from different villages participate in this fair.

"In the fair, we get to know who has which variety, and we exchange our seeds.

We also exchange our views on how to grow certain varieties of crops," said Karuna.

Other women, like Chanda Sarkar and Shamoli Sarker from the same village, were inspired by Karuna. They are also cultivating local varieties of vegetables and preserving seeds.

"Many local people come to my house daily to buy fresh vegetables," said Shamoli Sarker, 43.

Preserving 78 types of local-borne seeds and sowing it in her crop land, Shamoli became self-reliant by selling seeds and vegetables. She is also making vermicompost at her house and selling it.

"I received an order for 300 kilogram vermicompost from a local shopkeeper, at 22 taka per kilogram," she said.

Robiul Islam, upazila DAE officer of Batiaghata, told The Daily Star that preserving seeds helps people to do organic farming and to have a sound livelihood.

"Preserving seeds is a tradition of the people of this locality. Besides, it has an economical value," he said, adding that they are preserving over 100 varieties of vegetables and paddy seeds that are dying out.

It is proven that the local variety of seeds needs less fertilisers and insecticides, said Robiul Islam.

"I will patronise the seed preservation if they need my help," said the DAE officer.

By preserving local varieties of seeds and doing organic farming, Karuna, a 52-year-old farmer, has become a role model to other women in the area. She grows vegetables without using chemical fertilisers and insecticides.

Delowar Jahan, a practitioner and organiser of "natural agriculture"—which avoids using any chemical fertiliser and pesticide—has been promoting local seeds for over a decade.

He said, the adaptation capacity of local seeds is much more than other seeds.

"When a local variety grows in a particular area for a few years, genetically it becomes tolerant to local climatic conditions. So, preserving seeds of local varieties should be the best practice for the saline-prone coastal areas," added Delowar.

Some farmers' families have been preserving seeds for generations.

"Seeds of local varieties, preserved in a family for generations, have the most adaptive capability for the particular climatic conditions of that area," Delowar said. He suggested that the agricultural department should research more on local varieties to fight climate change in the agricultural sector.