VISUAL: **SALMAN SAKIB SHAHRYAR**

INDIAN SUPREME COURT'S HANDBOOK

A glimmer of hope for gender justice

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Recently, when I introduced myself to a male lawyer, he proceeded to give me some unsolicited advice, saying that the type of cases I am interested in wouldn't bring me success because I am a woman. Within minutes of introduction, he told me that female lawyers at his chambers are irregular and undependable because they get married and have kids. He then went on to suggest that I get married as well. This was a caricature of a conversation that I believe every woman in our country goes through.

In such situations, I do a mental calculation to determine whether it's worth educating such individuals right there and then. Most days, my brain tells me no. I was there for a specific business and a 10-minute speech would hardly sanitise years of social conditioning out of that man. But it took me years of soul-searching before I could finally forgive myself for not speaking out in these situations. Honestly, as women, we are tired of educating and raising men to be better, especially when the entire social structure is designed to promote stereotypes like my conversation above. We would love it if, for a change, this burden was taken up by the system instead of each woman. And the Supreme Court of India has just shown us how to go about it in a system that is plagued by antiquated ideas about women.

When I finished the *Handbook on Combating Gender Stereotypes*, a 30-page booklet published by the Supreme Court of India, a peculiar blend of joy and sadness washed over me. India's Chief Justice Dhananjaya Y Chandrachud's groundbreaking initiative of endorsing a gender-just judiciary breathed life into the transformative mission of creating the handbook. Throughout this booklet, which is primarily meant to be read by lawyers and judges, India's apex court has provided an exhaustive list of stereotype-promoting language that should be replaced by alternative language. For example, lawyers and judges are encouraged to replace words like "harlot," "career woman," "whore," "woman of loose morals/easy virtue," "promiscuous/wanton woman" with the plain and simple term of "woman." The objective is to ensure that legal reasoning and writing is free of assumptions and damaging notions about women.

I cannot help but feel immense joy that the highest court of our neighbouring country has taken such a spectacular, historic step forward, and I hope that their legislature will soon show support in its favour. I wonder when our judiciary might be brave enough to take such a progressive step forward. In Bangladesh, the humiliating and unscientific two-finger test was only abolished recently, and until the Evidence Act was amended in 2022, lawyers could cross-examine rape victims about their previous sexual history to reduce their credibility.

> **The handbook takes up only two pages to provide the list of alternative/preferred language; the rest of it is filled with excellent commentary on what stereotypes are, and how they can influence lawyers and judges to distort the application of law, among other issues. It also provides lists of stereotypes and compares them with a version of "reality" so that lawyers and judges can ascertain the difference and avoid applying these prejudices when they build, defend and judge a case.**

Aside from these black letter laws, there are countless patriarchal assumptions about women that find their way into courtrooms, jeopardising the scope for justice. Lawyers and judges regularly partake in endorsing these harmful notions. For example, in the headline-grabbing Narsingdi assault case of 2022, the judge implied that Bangladesh is too "civilised" for women to be wearing non-traditional clothes in rural areas, and a perpetrator has the right to protect the culture and heritage of the country by inciting violence against women who wear non-traditional clothes.

Words have power. Why do we say "child prostitute" and perpetuate the idea that it is children who decide to engage in sex work, when in reality they are victims of trafficking? For decades, our system has okayed these harmful phrases.

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Women are exhausted from fighting these stereotypes on a daily basis, be it with our fathers, husbands, friends, employers, colleagues or even a random person they just met. As a woman of the subcontinent constantly confronting similar stereotypes, seeing all the "reality" versions in a booklet created by the Supreme Court of India makes me feel profoundly understood. It should be noted that the use of alternative/preferred language is merely "encouraged" and not made mandatory – perhaps a smart move to sensitise the professionals first to what we can all agree is a momentous step forward for India.

Considering that judiciary is the last resort for anyone who has faced injustice, if the lawyers and judges internalise preconceived and problematic notions, how will justice ever prevail for women? I can sit here and fill the newspapers trying to raise awareness against these stereotypes, but this powerful advocacy coming straight from the Supreme Court, targeting lawyers and judges, will have unparalleled positive impact on ensuring a gender-just judicial system. As a female lawyer who is both on the receiving end of being stereotyped and who has the power to use the gender-just language in legal documents, I sincerely hope that the Indian Supreme Court's handbook will become an exemplary piece of document that the judiciary of Bangladesh and even the legislature could endorse.

US credit rating downgrade: Is all the commotion justified?

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The US debt has long been regarded as one of the most secure investments one could contemplate. The highly improbable chance of default by the United States, coupled with the supremacy of the US dollar, leads investors to view US Treasury bonds as an appealing investment option, especially for those who are highly risk-averse. Nevertheless, a significant event occurred when Fitch, one of the foremost credit rating agencies, downgraded the US government's treasuries from AAA to AA+ grade. This action has sparked concerns among many individuals, raising doubts about the stability of the US economy.

The downgrade occurred after President Joe Biden and the Congress came close to being unable to meet the debt obligations due to the substantial amount of debt the US holds. Consequently, it appears that this downgrade exposes certain vulnerabilities of the nation, impacting its global reputation and inciting panic among investors.

The significance of the US debt in the global economy is crucial, as it frequently serves as a benchmark for returns on stocks and other bonds. As US bonds are generally regarded as nearly risk-free assets, investors usually seek higher yields on alternative securities. If this

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Janet Yellen have expressed their dissatisfaction over Fitch's decision. They argue that the rating change is founded on outdated data and lay blame on the Trump administration. In particular, they have pointed out that Fitch highlighted the incident that occurred in January 2021, when Trump's followers converged on the Capitol Hill.

Continuing along the same line, numerous experts suggest that this downgrade has occurred not due to the country's economics, but due to politics. They contend that while the US establishment should continue as is. Furthermore, the other major credit rating agency, Moody's, still assigns the highest credit rating to US debt. Therefore, the "erosion of governance" in the US with respect to other major economies mentioned by Fitch is not a perspective shared by everyone in the industry.

Meanwhile, officials from the Biden administration and Treasury Secretary

US' ability to repay its debt. Dimon maintains that the US economy is the most substantial economy the world has ever witnessed and that it will not be influenced by a rating agency. He argues that the market is the ultimate decision-maker. If investors continue to place their trust in the American economy, the rating for US debt should remain at its highest possible level. Furthermore, Dimon concurs with concerns about politics and believes that the issue of the debt ceiling should be addressed.

We believe that all this commotion is the characteristic of every economic cycle, and just as it emerged, it will eventually dissipate. As most experts argue, the US remains the foremost global economy, earning the trust and respect of nations worldwide. It seems rather illogical that countries boasting higher credit ratings than the US would be investing in its bonds. It is true that there are many issues that should be addressed and rectified within the nation. As mentioned earlier, the debt ceiling is one of them. The US should formulate a plan or agenda that tackles this problem. While it is true that as long as countries continue to trust in the US as a robust economy, the US will never exhaust its borrowing power – everything does have a limit. Perhaps a more precise tax treatment can assist, along with controlling the import-export deficit.

We also have the political controversy. The turmoil during the last election damaged the US' image as a stable and united country. From now until November 2024, politicians will be pursuing votes and be more concerned about winning the elections, rather than what is best for the country. But it is crucial to set

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downgrade implies that US debt is no longer risk-free, its benchmarking attribute might also be impacted.

However, not many investors believe that the downgrade by Fitch will have consequences in the short run. Similar to what occurred 12 years ago when another credit rating agency, Standard & Poor's, decided to downgrade US bonds, there is no reason to think that the US economy will experience a decline. Thus, the

US may have become slightly riskier, it remains the safest place to invest your money. This is the case even though other economies such as Norway or Singapore boast a higher credit rating.

Jamie Dimon, chief executive of JPMorgan Chase, mentioned that the Fitch downgrade is somewhat irrelevant. He explained that the downgrade should not significantly impact investors' opinion of the

aside differences and work together.

Although all of these issues combined could become a serious problem for any nation, the reality is that the US is made to be virtually bulletproof. It takes more than that to erode America's supremacy, mainly because there is no other nation capable of assuming that position. Just as the Roman Empire wasn't built in a day, the US nation will not crumble in a single day either.

CROSSWORD BY THOMAS JOSEPH

ACROSS
1 Sweeping story
5 Endure
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11 Is heedful
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15 Cereal grain
16 Soviet symbol
18 Election year event
20 Acct. addition
21 Studio sign
22 Picnic invaders
23 Belly
24 Costume part
25 Asian language
27 Lot choice
29 Galley tool
30 Explain to death
32 Was behind
34 Whopper
35 Tea party guest
36 Make blank
38 Places last
39 Tore down
40 Ties the knot
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DOWN
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2 Five-time Derby winner
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10 Narrow passage
12 Classes
17 Go astray
19 Haleakala setting
22 Opera set in Egypt
24 Metal worker
25 Complete
26 Screen siren Jean
27 Spot
28 Sounds
30 Sanctify
31 Marsh growths
33 Like some tea
37 Flock father

YESTERDAY'S ANSWERS

P	A	T	H			L	A	M	A	R
I	D	E	A	L		A	M	A	Z	E
N	O	R	M	A		T	O	T	A	L
U	R	N		W	R	E	S	T	L	E
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E	L	T	O	N		S	N	E	E	R
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