Harassment:
The effects of “eve teasing” on development in Bangladesh
Imagine for a moment that you are an eleven year old girl in Bangladesh.

After helping your mother cook and serve breakfast, you are preparing for school. You should be excited. You like learning and school provides a reprieve from the drudgery of household chores. But you are not excited. Instead, you are filled with dread.

That is because every day, on the long walk from your house to school, you are surrounded and teased by a group of boys. The boys yell indecent things at you. They laugh. They push, pinch, and grab at you. Sometimes they pull at your clothes so violently that you are afraid they will be ripped right off of your body.

By the time you get to school, your face is hot with humiliation and your eyes sting with the fear that you will have to go through the whole thing again on the walk home.

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The Insidious Everyday Reality

Sexual harassment, often known as “eve teasing”, is a regular occurrence for the women and girls of Bangladesh. A recent study by the Bangladesh National Women Lawyers’ Association (BNWLA) showed that almost 90 percent of girls aged 10-18 have undergone the experience.

The harassment can take a variety of forms and the perpetrators come from multiple walks of life; they are rich and poor, educated and uneducated; according to the BNWLA study, teenage boys, rickshaw pullers, bus drivers, street vendors, traffic police and often supervisors or colleagues of the working women had all been cited as “eve teasers”.¹

For the girls and women who are subject to sexual harassment, the experiences are traumatic and can leave deep psychological scars. The BNWLA study also noted that in the past two years, at least 12 girls have committed suicide in circumstances stemming from “eve teasing”.² And the innocuousness of the label belies further violent implications. It is often associated with rape and murder.³

Rape is the most common form of violence against women in Bangladesh. Between 2002 and 2006, there were over five thousand reported incidents. Almost two thousand of those rapes were of girl children. 625 of the victims were killed after they were raped and 69 killed themselves.⁴ One has to wonder how many of these crimes could have been prevented if society took sexual harassment more seriously and did not wait until girls were raped and murdered to take action.

No one should have to suffer the experience of sexual harassment or the physical and sexual assaults that often come with it. As vicious and tormenting as sexual harassment is for the girls and women who endure it, however, the implications extend to the entire nation.

Curtailed Education

Sexual harassment increases girls' drop-out rate from school.⁵ Parents concerned about their daughter's honor or safety sometimes keep their daughters home and/or marry them off at an early age.⁶
Education is an inalienable right guaranteed under the Convention on the Rights of the Child to which Bangladesh is a signatory. But more than that, education for girls is key to improving the standard of living in a society. Anything that results in girls not being educated is a disaster for us all.

Study after study shows that educating girls yields a multiplicity of benefits, including later marriages; reduced fertility rates; decreased infant and maternal mortality; improved health and nutritional status; and greater participation of women in political and economic decisions.

According to the UN Population Fund study, educated women farmers perform exceptionally well compared to men. A study found that crop yields could rise up to 22 percent if women farmers had the same education and inputs (such as fertilizer, credit, investment) as men farmers.

Kumud Sharma of the Centre for Women's Development Studies in New Delhi has noted that even a basic education raises awareness on once-taboo issues, such as domestic violence. With education comes the confidence and the courage to ask questions and raise a voice against injustice. Educated women take active roles in economic and political decision making and are more likely to resist physical abuse at home.

Education helps women make calculated decisions about their futures. If a woman goes to school, she becomes an educated mother who has basic health care knowledge. An educated woman is less likely to die in pregnancy or childbirth, she provides better nutrition for her children, and she has fewer of them. UNICEF reported in 2007 that when mothers are educated through primary school, the mortality rate for their children is halved. Access to education passes through generations; an educated mother is two times more likely to send her child to school than an uneducated mother.

**Early Marriage**

Through the same process in which eve teasing pushes girls out of education, girls who are harassed are also pushed into marriage, before they are physically or mentally prepared. Half of Bangladeshi girls are married before they reach 15 years old, and they usually bear their first child while they are still teenagers. Adolescent girls face the risks of childbirth often without medical care and have a high incidence of maternal mortality. Mothers in aged 15 to 19 face a 20 to 200 percent greater chance of dying in pregnancy than women aged 20 to 24.

There are further implications of child marriages. Bangladesh has the highest rates of malnutrition in the world. The vicious cycle of malnutrition is perpetuated by the status of women and particularly young mothers within the family hierarchy. As the young wife, she usually eats last and least, taking whatever is left over after feeding the husband and sons. Hence, she gives birth to underweight, malnourished, unhealthy babies and this cycle continues with no respite in sight.
Hindered Development

Sexual harassment is a manifestation of the patriarchal cultural norms of Bangladesh. It also reinforces those norms; it is both a symptom and a cause. Inasmuch as the harassment contributes to maintaining the low status of women, it also interferes with ending hunger.

A 2003 study by the International Food Policy Research Institute (IFPRI), which utilizes data from over one hundred thousand children in 36 developing countries, demonstrates that when women’s status gets better, their nutrition improves and their children’s nutrition improves. In South Asia, where the status of women is the lowest, improvements in women’s status would have the strongest affect. The study concluded that if there were an equalization of men’s and women’s decision-making power in South Asia, the incidence of underweight children under three years old would fall by up to 13 percentage points, resulting in 13.4 million fewer undernourished children in the region.16 This study shows that elevating women’s overall status seems to be a crucial precondition to ending hunger.

Bangladesh is not a country that can afford to dally or placate traditional attitudes when it comes to ending hunger. It has one of the highest rates of child mortality in the world and the majority of those deaths are from causes related to hunger.17 Sexual harassment is implicated in those deaths. The phenomenon must be dealt with seriously and immediately. It affects not only the girls and women who are subject to the acts but also leads to social violence, stops girls from being educated, promotes maternal and child mortality, keeps women from being empowered, and ultimately prevents the end of hunger.

The Response

Article 76 of the Dhaka Metropolitan Police Ordinance and Article 509 of the Penal Code of 1860 affirm that any acts, conducts, or verbal abuses that are used to disgrace women are punishable by law.18 In other words, sexual harassment is illegal. However, state interventions have been inadequate in stopping it to date. The law enforcing authorities have failed to protect women and girls.

We must take sexual harassment seriously and bring it to a halt. We can do this through the legal system, by enforcing the laws, arresting the perpetrators, and bringing them to trial. Alongside a legal response, we must also work to alter the underlying conditions that give rise to the offenses. By raising the status of women and girls, and endeavoring to achieve gender equality, we can end the practice of sexual harassment, end hunger and uplift the quality of life for all.

The Hunger Project and National Girl Child Day

The Hunger Project (THP), a global, strategic organization committed to the sustainable end of world hunger, recognizes that the future of Bangladesh resides in the future of its girls. As long as girls are treated as inferior and less valuable than boys, the general well-being of society cannot advance. Former Secretary General of the United Nations, Kofi Annan, has said: "There is no tool for development more effective than the education of girls. No other policy is as likely to raise economic productivity, lower infant and maternal mortality, improve nutrition and promote health.”
In accordance with these facts, The Hunger Project designed a strategy to cause a breakthrough in elevating status of girls in Bangladesh. In 2000, we organized the first National Girl Child Day on September 30th. Working with government ministries, women's organizations, schools, the media, and more than 300 NGOs we seek to awaken Bangladeshi citizens to the critical importance of providing better health, education and nutrition to girls as the highest leverage investment for the future of the country.

National Girl Child Day is now celebrated in festivities across the entirety of the country. Hunger Project volunteers take a leadership role to ensure that the National Girl Child Day celebrations reach out to villagers in every district.

Essay contests are held in schools throughout the nation. Both boys and girls win prizes for writing about the importance of better health and education for girls in Bangladeshi society.

In festivities in Dhaka, as well as in remote rural areas, organizations rally their constituency to hold teach-ins and marches in support of National Girl Child Day.

National Girl Child day generates powerful media coverage in newspaper, television and radio - educating the public on the critical importance of this issue. The girl child is celebrated for who she is and what she means for the future of Bangladesh.


7 Statement by H.E. Barrister Ziaur Rahman Khan, MP Hon’ble Chairman Parliamentary Standing Committee on Foreign Affairs Government of the People’s Republic of Bangladesh at the Third Committee of the 60th Session of the UN General Assembly on Agenda item 67: Promotion and Protection of the Rights of Children. New York, 18 October 2005.


