



Monjurul Kabir

*The Protection of Children
from Violence*

Draft

The State of Violence against Children in Bangladesh

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1. Introduction

“ The way a society treats its children reflects not only its qualities of compassion and protective caring, but also its sense of justice, its commitment to the future and its urge to enhance the human condition for coming generations.” -

Javier Perez de Cuellar,
*Former Secretary General of the
United Nations*

Across the globe, children are exposed to different forms of violence that impedes their mental, physical, psychological and moral growth. Violence can be defined as deliberate behaviour by people against people liable to cause physical or psychological harm, borrowing and adopting a definition used by various national commissions set up to consider violence and prevention. The definition could, of course, range wider to include societal forms of violence- the effects of poverty, exploitative child labour, and lack of adequate health care and education, and non deliberate neglect by the state, parents and others. However, the focus here is on interpersonal violence to children. Article 1 of the Convention of the Rights of the Child defines a child as every human being below the age of 18 years, unless under the law applicable, majority is attained earlier.

Violence against children is causing increasing concern in Bangladesh. The intense media spotlight, often on particularly horrifying individual cases of violence against children, suggests – greater prevalence. Children are particularly vulnerable to the increased incidents of acid throwing, rape, political violence, sexual abuse and exploitation. They remain prone to a litany of human rights violations at the hands of state agencies – from arbitrary detention, cruel punishments to torture and killings. In the wider community and the privacy of the family, children also suffer systematic abuse of their rights. Although state officials may deny their responsibilities for these latter abuses, their complicity, acquiescence and in difference often serve to perpetuate them.

This paper attempts to present a brief narrative of violence committed against the children of Bangladesh. Following the introduction, section 2 discusses the patterns of violence against children. Section 3 describes the genus of violence generally perpetrated against the children of Bangladesh. Section 4 focuses on the legal protection of children. Section 5 examines the possible role of young people for the cause of children. Significance of national initiatives for implementing global standards has been affirmed in section 6. Finally, some concluding remarks on the proposition have been offered.

2. Trends of Violence

Violence against children is not confined to any specific zone. Home, workplace, street, prisons – everywhere children become easy prey of violence. However, children are more prone to political violence in urban areas especially in metropolitan cities. It appears from the analysis of the reported cases that destitute or underprivileged children belonged to poor families or children who are abandoned or street children are the most affected group by all sorts of violence mentioned earlier

Age is a major issue in assessing vulnerabilities. It appears that no age is safe age. Children are always vulnerable. The age group of 10-14 years came across as the period during which the highest number of abuses occurs. Both boys and girls become the frequent victims of domestic and institutional violence. Girls are more vulnerable than boys are. Girl children have to face abuse twice. First, the child is sexually abused. Next, she is abused by society through its customs, practices, censures and ostracizations. Adolescent girls are most susceptible to and fall prey to declarations of love. Acid attacks are perpetrated mostly against them. Boys are more prone to political violence. In the absence of reliable qualified data, it is not possible to provide accurate numerical information or the ratio of boys and girls facing violence and abuse.

There seems to be very little evidence to show that any specific group is more vulnerable to violence. In the Chittagong Hill Tracts in Bangladesh, over 100 tribal people were reportedly killed in Logang on 10 April 1992, apparently in reprisal for the killing of a Bengali boy by Shanti Bahini fighters. Paramilitary security forces reportedly set fire to the village and shot dead those attempting to escape. Survivors of the killings, including a 17-year old witness reported that they had seen mothers feeding their children being shot dead and children being thrown alive into the flames.¹

In fact throughout the world, children are being subjected to horrific violence and abuse. Bangladesh is not an exception, rather active participant. And it will be clarified even more from the succeeding discussion that the trends are diverse.

¹ Amnesty International, *Children in South Asia – Securing their rights*, (Amnesty International, London, 1998).

3. Genus of Violence against Children

3.1 Domestic Violence

Abuse, torture and trauma await many of the children, particularly girls taking domestic jobs in middle class homes in increasing numbers. There is no reliable figure for the number of child domestics in Dhaka, but a 1985 survey of 3,15,000 households by the government showed 44 percent employed full time servants, while 27 percent had part time workers. More recently, it has been estimated that the total number of child domestics in the country may vary time to time from 2,00,000 to a million.² 25% of housewives report that they physically beat child domestics to punish them for poor performance or ill behaviour. In 68% cases, they verbally abuse children for poor performance³

3.2 Sexual Abuse and Exploitation

Sexual abuse is defined as rape and incest and associated offences occurring at household level (non-commercial), sexual exploitation as trafficking, pornography and prostitution (society level - commercial). Some data on the scale of the problem of sexual exploitation are available but very little on sexual abuse. The problems faced by children do not begin nor end with the odd rape or regular molestation. Out of the 71 child domestics interviewed, 23.5 percent had been sexually abused, while the 10 percent said they had been raped by their employers.⁴ Nearly all hospitals report intake of sexually abused children. The Child development Centre of the Dhaka Shishu Hospital reports that 5-7% of patients to be sexually abused.

There is a growing awareness among professionals and NGOs for the need to address the issue of sexual abuse. Some factors identified have been early marriage of girl child, domestic child workers, child labour within export oriented factories, and interpersonal abuse with a wide range of intra and extra familial relationship⁵. The link between sexual abuse and subsequent exploitation is clear. A child or (young adult) who work as a maid and is seduced or raped, more often the latter, by her employer is seen not as a victim but as a partner in the act. The child is then subject not only to verbal and physical abuse by the employer's wife, daughter and/or sister, but is also thrown out of the house. It is at this point she then becomes vulnerable to trafficking and prostitution. The problem with sexual abuse within the family is similar. A girl who is the victim of incest will not be heard when she complains, and

² UNICEF, *Daily Lives of Working Children*, (UNICEF, Dhaka, 1997); see also CCHRB, *The State of Human Rights-Bangladesh 1997*, (CCHRB, Dhaka, 1998).

³ Research and Computing Services Private Limited, *Prevailing Opinion and Attitude towards Child Domestics*, (RCS, Dhaka, 1998).

⁴ Therese Blanchet, *Lost Innocent, Stolen Childhood - A Study on Child Domestics* sponsored by Radda Barnen

⁵ N. Z. Khan and M. A. Lynch, "Recognising Child Maltreatment in Bangladesh" in 21 *Child Abuse and Neglect* 8, 1997

is similarly exposed to a continuation of the abuse, or may be thrown out of the house, where she will fall prey to traffickers and pimps⁶

For 'sexual abuse data' are difficult to get. It is possible to apply above-mentioned factors (e.g., early marriage, incidence of domestic child workers, child labour related to sexual abuse) as a proxy indicator. The remaining information is based on case histories. A major case history report produced by a group of activists and professionals provides some compelling observations; the mean age of first sexual abuse was 11.6 years, adolescent girls face ostracization and exclusion after being abused (often after being lured into a relationship under false promises).⁷

There also emerges a chilling picture of rural societies where power relations, the need for rural societies to preserve family and social prestige against all costs and emotional dependence leads to abused children keeping the silence to keep the family at a virtual peace (Table A):

Table A: Disclosure of Abuse⁸

Criteria	Approached	Discussed Topic	Admitted Abuse	
Urban Male	12	10	8	0.67
Urban Female	30	22	17	0.57
Rural Male	48	20	9	0.19
Rural Female	30	22	16	0.53
Total	120	74	50	0.42

⁶ Sexually Exploited and Abused Children: A Qualitative Assessment of their Health and Services available to them in Bangladesh prepared by Ain O Salish Kendra and United Nations Economic and Social Commission for South Asia the Pacific-February 1999-Draft

⁷ Breaking the Silence, *Non-commercial Sexual Abuse of Children in Bangladesh*, (Breaking the Silence, Dhaka, 1997)

⁸ *Ibid.*

There is also interesting information on the molester. Once a person becomes an abuser, his/her likelihood of becoming a habitual abuser is large, making remedial action imperative. Most molesters are those who have access to the abused without arousing fear or suspicion. No wonder that the culprit most often can be found among close relatives and persons close to the house (Table B):

Table B: Access to the Abused⁹

Abuser	Father, Uncle & other close relatives	Persons Known (House Tutor, Neighbour, Others)	Other known members of society	Strangers	Total	
Abused						
Rural Girl	8	4	2	2	16	0.32
Urban Girl	2	10	3	2	17	0.34
Rural Boy	3	6	-	-	9	0.18
Urban Boy	3	3	2	-	8	0.16
Total	16	23	7	4	50	1

The Committee on the Rights of the Child rightly observes, “The committee is concerned at the lack of appropriate measures to combat and prevent ill treatment and abuse including sexual abuse, both within the family and outside the family and at the lack of awareness and information on this matter.”¹⁰

Implications for the child survivors: Some information has recently become available on the implications for child victims. ESCAP and ASK recently commissioned an informal survey among 35 child commercial sex-workers and 15 non-commercially abused children. It was found that sexually abused children show symptoms of disturbed behaviour. Most of the young sex-workers have no shelter, no savings, are undernourished and now face health problems. They show the same emotionally disturbed behaviour as the sexually abused. They also show an amazing resilience of these children, illustrated by the overwhelming rejection of suicide, self-mutilation or destructive of other property.

⁹ Breaking the Silence, *Non-commercial Sexual Abuse of Children in Bangladesh*, (Breaking the Silence, Dhaka, 1997).

¹⁰ Concluding Observation on the Initial Report of Bangladesh, June 1997; also available at <www.un.org>

3.3 Violence at Workplace

In Bangladesh, the dramatic increase of adolescent girls employed in the garment industry, is found along with the employment of adolescent boys in the informal sectors such as transportation (as helper in buses, auto rickshaws, vans) small scale units etc leading to exploitation in wages, vulnerability in maintaining jobs, coupled with unspecified working conditions. The vulnerability of the adolescent leads to further exploitation economically as well as in the increasing violence reported. The awareness of the print media in reporting cases of violence shows quite starkly that children and adolescents are the primary victims of sexual abuse and violence.

3.4 Rape, Abuse and the Safe Custody

Young boys and girls taken in to protective custody by the police in this country are among those most vulnerable to rape and sexual abuse. Contrary to the provision of the Children Act 1974, thousands of children are rounded up, often without any cause and kept in adult prisons, with no recourse to legal protection. The most traumatic experience for children is the way they are routinely abused in protective custody of police in the Thana or prison where they are supposed to be safe.¹¹ Sending women and girl children, victims of crimes especially of sex offences to prison in the name of safe custody under section 100 of the Cr.P.C. is a glaring instance of abuse. Instances are not rare that women in safe custody of Bangladesh jails are violated and killed by those who are supposed to protect them.

Rape can be classified as one of the most heinous crimes committed against the body and mind of a woman regardless her age. Unfortunately, such a crime has escalated in number in the last year. In 1998, there were 961 reported cases of rape. In 1997, 733 cases were recorded. The age group most violated is 6 to 11 years. In 1998 alone, 187 female children of this group were raped while 164 cases involved victims falling in the 12-15 years old bracket. In one incident, on 10 March 1998, a minor girl aged eight was raped in the police control room at the Chief Metropolitan Magistrate Court Building. It must be noted that many of these crimes took place in broad daylight.¹²

3.5 Acid Throwing

Acid throwing to disfigure a human face is one of the most pervasive forms of violence. The first documented case of acid violence in Bangladesh goes back to 1967 when a young girl, Nomita had acid poured on her by her admirer when her mother refused his marriage proposal.

The targets are primarily females. In Bangladesh, acid throwing seems to be highly prevalent among the lower socio-economic groups, both in the urban and rural areas.

¹¹ 'Sexually Exploited and Abused Children: A Qualitative Assessment of their Health and Services available to them in Bangladesh' prepared by Ain O Salish Kendra and United Nations Economic and Social Commission for South Asia the Pacific-February 1999-Draft.

¹² Odhikar, a coalition for human rights, also *The Daily Star*, April 11, 1999

The victims are mainly school going girls, usually between 12 and 22 years of age who have spurned the sexual advances of predatory males. Recently, however the profile of the target seems to be changing with older women also being targeted and causes such as family disputes, vengeance and dowry demands have been identified.

The consequences of acid attacks are traumatic – physically, psychologically and socially. The impact of nitric or sulphuric acid on the body is catastrophic; it causes skin tissues to melt, often leaving the bones underneath exposed, sometimes even dissolving the bone and, most seriously, where the acid strikes the eyes permanently damaging them. Many of the survivors lose one or both eyes. For most survivors the attack is followed by a dramatic change in their lifestyles for most of them having to give up their education and/or previous work because of the time needed for their recovery and the often-debilitating disfigurement that occurs. Following the incident victims are often faced with social isolation that further damages their economic position, self-esteem and confidence. An acid attack on an unmarried woman in Bangladesh virtually excludes her from ever getting married.

Evidence indicates an alarming increase in the number of incidents though the actual number is considerably higher given the backward nature of rural communication. In 1996 alone, there were 47 reported cases of acid violence; in 1997 the number rose to 130. In 1998, there were over 200 reported cases (It is highly likely that the number of actual cases is considerably higher). Statistics for the first quarter (January to March) of 1999 show the figures to be at 16. Out of 16, 13 belong to the age group of 6 to 20¹³.

The problem of acid violence in Bangladesh is serious and growing. A ‘Helping Survivors of Acid Violence’ project was established in November 1998 and one of its main aims was to establish an independent, self-sustaining Foundation – created through a trust – financed by local and international donors. The Acid Survivors Foundation has now been established.

3.6 Political / Hartal Violence

Like many other countries in the world, street protest through diverse modes is an accepted mechanism in the politics of Bangladesh for asserting any disapproval or disagreement. However, unlike most other countries Hartal¹⁴ or strike coupled with violent protest is used here frequently as a regular political programme. Nowadays “political hartal turns into a reason for senseless violence - it becomes a killer of innocent victims”¹⁵. It has become a custom that the street urchins be arrested before and during hartal hours on vague suspicion. Often the police mercilessly beat them. They are, in fact treated alike the older criminals in police stations and jails.

In 1998 during the hartal hours at least 3 children were killed and about 13 were injured in bomb blasting, clashes between rival parties and police firing¹⁶. One of the most alarming trends of the recent confrontational political programs is bomb attack

¹³ Odhikar, a coalition for human rights

¹⁴ Hartal is a local term for a forced total shutdown of the formal economy, often coupled with violence among political groups.

¹⁵ Hartal - A Death-trap For Innocent, *Star Weekend Magazine*, March 5 1999

¹⁶ Odhikar, a coalition for human rights

by snipers. Sniping at the opponents with crackers during hartal hours exposes people from all walks of life to virtual death threat. In the first four months of 1999, (1 January to 30 April 1999) three children were died and 13 other critically injured due to hartal violence.¹⁷ Therefore, it is clear that the number of child victims of hartal is ever increasing exposing the violent nature of politics.

SAGA OF PARVEZ AND RUNA

Parvez, a thirteen-year-old boy breathed his last on 12 April 1999 after being in coma for 46 days since February 25. Hit in the head by a sharp edged brick hurled by pickets on the opposition called hartal day, young Parvez, an apprentice in a motor garage at Saidabad in the city, died at the Intensive Care Unit of the Dhaka Medical College Hospital at 10.30 am for multi-system failure¹⁸.

An eight-year-old girl Runa received serious injuries from bomb blast during a dawn to dusk hartal on October 18, 1998. Her wrists blew up when the two bombs she was holding unknowingly during the hartal, exploded. A boy chased by the police during the hartal gave her the bombs to hold for some time near the Azimpur Colony in the city. Four fingers of the left hand and one finger of the right hand of Runa were amputated. Her left eye was also injured¹⁹.

Children are widely used in political programmes and election propaganda.²⁰

3.7 Corporal Punishment

The CRC prohibits the torture or other cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment or punishment of children in Article 37. Article 35(4) of the Constitution of Bangladesh clearly states that no person shall be subjected to torture or to cruel, inhuman or degrading punishment or treatment. According to police regulations, torture or beating even during interrogation is an actionable offence and a violation of law. However, children appear to suffer the same cruel treatment as adult prisoners, including shackling. In November 1980 at the age of 12, Nazrul Islam was arrested. He was convicted of robbery and sentenced to seven year's imprisonment. In late 1992, it emerged that he was still in Satkhira Jail, well after his sentence had expired, and that for most of the past 12 years he had been held in shackles. When his story was exposed, the High Court examined the case. It found that Nazrul Islam's entire 12-year detention had been illegal and ordered his release. During his long

¹⁷ Odhikar, a coalition for human rights

¹⁸ The Daily Star, April 13, 1999

¹⁹ The Daily Star, October 20, 1998

²⁰ The author as a part of Law Watch's monitoring work, examines some of the recent campaigns for the forthcoming National Parliamentary Election 2001(to be held on October 1, 2001) and finds that children are widely used in all kinds of political propaganda including arousing hate speech against the contenders. a

imprisonment, the leg irons were removed only when he was transferred to hospital for medical treatment. He was even brought to High Court hearing in 1992 in chains. It was not known if was awarded any compensation.²¹

It was also reported in the newspapers that in some residential madrasa (religious teaching centre), children face degrading punishment and humiliating behaviour from madrasa authority and teaching staffs. The Committee on the Rights of the Child in its concluding observation the Initial Report of Bangladesh (June 1997) aptly remarks, “ The Persistence of corporal punishment and its acceptance by the society and instances of violence by law enforcement officials against abandoned and vagrant children is a matter of serious concern.”

3.8 Death Penalty/Capital Punishment

The view that judicial executions violate the right to life is reflected in the ever-growing international consensus opposing the death penalty for all – and for children in particular. It is believed that at least one child has been sentenced to death in Bangladesh. Mohammad Selim, who was sentenced to death by a martial court and executed in 1986, was only 17 years old at the time of alleged offence. The authorities claimed he was older.²²

This example testifies the vulnerability of those who are neither children nor adult. In fact, those who belonged to the age group of 16 to 18 are in more disadvantageous position. Being adolescent, they cannot claim the protection of children; on the other hand they do not enjoy the rights and privileges of adults.

²¹Amnesty International, *Children in South Asia – Securing their rights*, (Amnesty International, London, 1998).

²²*Ibid.*

4. Legal Safeguards: Whither Protection

A number of legal safeguards exist to combat violence against children. However it should be mentioned at the very outset that children who come in conflict with law do not always get the protection provided in the law from the police, magistrates and probation officers or jail warders. Some progressive laws, such as the Children Act 1974, give the state a positive image but offer little protection to children because of their poor implementation.

LAWS AFFECTING CHILDREN
The Code of Criminal Procedure (<i>providing for the trial of children in juvenile courts</i>)
The Penal Code of 1860 (<i>providing punishment for a wide range of crimes against Children</i>)
The Suppression of Immoral Traffic Act of 1933 (<i>punishing those detaining minors for Prostitution</i>)
Child Marriage Restraint Act of 1929 (<i>restraining practice of child marriage</i>)
The Children Act of 1974 (<i>regulating the law relating to the custody, protection and treatment of children and punishment of youthful offenders</i>)
The Dowry Prohibition Act of 1980 (<i>outlawing the custom of dowry</i>)
The Cruelty to Women (Deterrent Punishment) Ordinance of 1983 (<i>providing deterrent punishment for cruel treatment of women and girl child</i>)
Prevention of Repression of Women and Children (Special Provisions) Act of 2000 (<i>providing rigorous punishment for violence against women and children</i>).

As already mentioned most of the laws have no proper implementation. It is evident that there is no specific law defining child sexual abuse. It is also interesting to note that successive governments in Bangladesh followed a similar trend of enacting a 'specialised legislation' for curbing women and children oppression/repression. These legislations generally provide for special tribunal to try the offenders and provide for very harsh punishment. However, these provisions of special law do not seem to have any substantial impact on combating violence against children. The long term effect of enacting special legislation without exploring existing legal provision and recourse may be counter productive to the goal for fighting violence against children.

5. Role of Young People/Groups

The role of young people is significant in promoting and protecting the rights of the child. Young people are sensitised towards the aspiration, frustration and condition of the children. They can, in fact, act as the agent of change. In Bangladesh, a large number of groups, clubs, and societies of young people are active in *pro children* activities. These organisations are committed to different causes, e.g., social, human rights, cultural, entrepreneurship, professional interests, sports etc. In addition, some specialised young professional groups cater specific interests of the children with dedication. LAW WATCH, A Centre for Studies on Human Rights Law <lawwatch2001@yahoo.com> is one such group, which recognises child rights as core human rights issue.

Young people can impartially raise issues of concerns and mobilise people and other stakeholders for solution. Most importantly, young people can break the social custom and taboos with their selfless, genuine efforts. The potentials of the young people must be utilised to combat growing intolerance and acts of violence against children.

Young people and groups should be brought into ambit of national plans of action, if any, as implementing agencies. Educational institutions can play an effective role in mobilising them properly

6. Urgency for Local Initiatives

Here in Bath at the 2001 World Congress on Family Law and the Rights of Children and Youth (19-22 September 2001) the International Children's Rights Protection Network is proposed to be launched to provide assistance for children through legal advocacy, advocacy of policy and legislative change and education. While international efforts are critically important to further the cause of children world wide, national initiatives are must to make the real difference in the lives of the children of the world. No matter how effective international mechanisms might be, and they are far from being sufficiently so at present, there is no substitute for a concerted domestic initiative of implementing national obligations towards these rights guaranteed internationally. The implementation and compliance with international human rights treaties and standards are ultimately national issues – a reality, which is often lost in the midst of rapid internationalisation of human rights. As asserted by Jack Donnelly:

Human rights are ultimately a profoundly national, not international, issue. In an international system where government is national rather than global, human rights is by definition principally a national matter. States are the principal violators of human rights and the principal actors governed by international norms.²³

For Bangladesh, acceding to international human rights regime practically means a little as the implementation of its international obligation at national level still remains a far cry. Like many other 'so called democratic governments', the Government of Bangladesh routinely conceals the conclusions and recommendations of the UN treaty bodies made on their periodical reports.²⁴

International initiatives must be backed by pro-active national policies and programmes. Efforts in child protection and child development must be proactive, strategic well coordinated, research based backed up by policy and legislation, and with allocation of adequate manpower and resources.

Increasingly the role of domestic courts is becoming important in implementing international human rights standards. The concept of judicial activism ushered a new horizon of hope in South Asia as the Supreme Court of India has taken commendable steps to assert its supervision on matters of public interests.²⁵ In a number of recent landmark decisions, the Supreme Court of Bangladesh has also stepped in to the

²³ Jack Donnelly, *Universal Human Rights in Theory and Practice*, (Ithaca and London, Cornell University Press, 1989), p. 266.

²⁴ A.H.Monjurul Kabir, "Bangladesh at the CERD Committee Session 2001: Ensuring penalisation of the acts of racial discrimination", *Law and Our Rights, The Daily Star*, 8 April 2001, p. 9, also available at

< <http://www.dailystarnews.com/200104/08/n1040809.htm#BODY1> >

²⁵ Abul Hasnat Monjurul Kabir, "Protection and Promotion of Human Rights and Their Enforcement Mechanisms in South Asia" 18 *BISS Journal* 160 (1997), p. 170.

discourse of judicial activism.²⁶ Undeniably courts have the most effective role to perform in shielding the human rights of the individual against the state; they have manifold judicial functions and are not usually included within the concept of national human rights institution, as it is perceived today.

Enacting a distinct legislation on human rights and establishing its implementing agencies can be a viable option. As a dualist²⁷ country, Bangladesh generally enacts implementing legislation to fulfil the international obligations it has undertaken.

The work of the proposed National Human Rights Commission²⁸ of Bangladesh, whether it be in relation to advising government, investigating violations, education about human rights, must be undertaken with reference and in accordance with, international human rights treaty standards. It should be associated with the preparation of reports and possibly be included in government delegations to the treaty bodies in order to intensify the dialogue between the treaty bodies and the State party concerned. It should also take concrete steps to encourage the government to ratify all human rights instruments without declaration and reservation. The proposed NHRC can promote and protect specially the rights of the children through its recommendatory power and monitoring role.

Spreading human rights education at the grass root level in both the formal and the informal ways is another useful strategy to create awareness on state responsibility towards international obligations. This area is, in fact, neglected and still unexplored.²⁹

²⁶ Star Law Report, *Law and Our Rights*, *The Daily Star*, 1 July 2001, pp. 5-6, also available at <<http://www.dailystarnews.com/law>>

²⁷ Dualists maintain that there are two essentially legal systems, existing side by side within different sphere of action—the international law and the domestic (national) law. Monists assert that there is but a single system of law, with international law being an element within it alongside all the various branches of domestic law, e.g., labour law, contract law, employment law etc.

²⁸ The concept of national human rights institutions is, however, far more specific referring as it does to a body whose functions are specifically defined in terms of the promotion and protection of human rights. National human rights institutions are a relatively recent development among mechanisms for the promotion and protection of human rights. They have developed as a means where states can more effectively work to guarantee human rights within their own jurisdictions. They do not replace the role of the courts and judiciary, legislative bodies, relevant government agencies, parliamentary committees, political parties or religious or non-governmental organisations. They are independent authorities established by law to protect the human rights of the people of their country.

²⁹ The author has been developing a training module and strategy for Odhikar, a human rights organisation using the ‘UN Human Rights Defenders’ Declaration 1998’ in cooperation with the American Centre. Odhikar trained 200 human rights defenders by July this year and plans to hold a national conference of human rights defenders in September 2001. The targeted participants were selected from eight districts of six divisions, namely, Munshiganj, Manikgonj, Sylhet, Patuakhali, Rangamati, Rajshahi, Dinajpur and Jessore.

6. Instead of a Conclusion

Never in history has so much attention been paid to children's rights especially from the last two decades of the 20th century. The World Summit on Children, 1990 can, for instance, illustrate this, which brought together seventy-one Heads of States and Prime Minister in order to put children's rights higher on the agenda for the next decades. However adoption by the UN and ratification by individual countries, whilst important, will not in themselves, create real true change in children's lives. Moreover, "this growing recognition and popularity of children's rights, however, is not free from danger of becoming a fashion."³⁰ No state desires to be branded as unfriendly towards children rights thus it was hardly surprising that states were in such a haste to ratify the Convention. Still millions of children receive no education, work long hours under hazardous conditions, or languish in inhumane conditions in institutions. Others endure harassment and physical abuse by police, are subject to trafficking and sexual exploitation, or are forced to become soldiers or refugees from armed conflict.³¹ Sheer lack of political commitment on the part of the governments make the situation worse. The promises of the Convention remain hollow to the most of the children of the world.

The idea that children are individual entities with rights and privileges is a relatively new concept for most people. While physical chastisement of children is not unusual in Bangladesh, it appears that many children are the victims of physical, psychological, and sexual abuse. In many cases, the perpetrators are adult family members or friends of the family. The children are trapped into silence by their fear of retribution by the adult concerned and/or rejection by their families. For children without the protection of adults or families the situation is even worse. Children are also increasingly being hostages of violent politics.

The international framework for the protection of children rights is constantly evolving. The new standards should not be seen as conferring "special" rights on children, but rather as a means of realising the rights. Children by virtue of being human, share the same rights under the numerous international instruments and national constitutions. Establishing the equality of enjoyment of those rights and guarantees for children still remains the greatest challenges for all of us.

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³⁰ P. E. Veerman, *The Rights of the Child and the Changing Image of the Childhood* (Dordrecht, Martinus Nijhoff Publishers, 1992), p.400.

³¹ Human Rights Watch, *World Report 1999 - Children's Rights*, available on <<http://www.hrw.org/hrw/wr2k/Crd.htm>>