

## Road crash casualties rising by the day

23 lives lost in a single day!

WE are shocked to learn that at least 23 people were killed and nine others injured in separate road crashes across the country on March 6. Ten people were killed when a microbus crashed into a roadside tree in Habiganj (all of them were going to attend an engagement ceremony in Sunamganj), while in another accident, six people were burnt to death when a gas cylinder of a microbus caught fire after it collided with a bus on Dhaka-Sylhet highway. On the same day, a student of Dhaka University was killed when a bus hit his motorcycle in the capital's Banani area. What worries us most is the fact that such horrible accidents, despite taking place on our roads regularly, seem to have no effect on the road transport authorities as well as the transport owners and workers. It is only the victims' families who suffer in silence as their fight to get justice for their loved ones never ends.

According to a report by the Road Safety Foundation, at least 445 people were killed and 834 others injured in 340 road accidents across the country in January alone this year. The alarming increase in road accidents indicates that all the initiatives taken by the government—the formulation of the Road Transport Act 2018, observance of Police Week to make the commuters and pedestrians aware of traffic rules, the PM's directives given in 2018, including limiting the drive-time of the drivers on long-route vehicles, etc.—have failed to bring order on our roads.

The reasons behind the rise in road accidents have already been identified by the transport experts as well as the organisations working on road safety, which include unfit vehicles, reckless driving, drivers' incompetence and their physical or mental unsuitability, unregulated working hours for drivers, poor traffic management, the inefficiency of the Bangladesh Road Transport Authority (BRTA) and the lack of knowledge about traffic rules among the general people or the tendency to disregard them.

Since cases of road accidents and the deaths resulting from them are rising by the day, the government must wake up to the reality and make all-out efforts to properly implement the Road Transport Act 2018. Besides, initiatives should also be taken to increase the number of skilled drivers, construct road dividers on all highways, fix salaries and working hours of drivers and ban low-speed vehicles on highways, as the Road Safety Foundation has also recommended.

## CCC's half-hearted attempt at cleaning streets

Proper waste management is vital to city life

A recent report by this daily has drawn our attention to a pathetic display of dereliction and inefficiency by the Chattogram City Corporation (CCC) officials responsible for keeping the streets clean. According to the report, heaps of waste lifted from drains in the Ujir Ali Shah By-lane of KB Aman Ali Road in the Rahattar Pool area have been left by the roadside for several days now. The unbearable stench resulting from the unattended waste has left the pedestrians and residents of the area to suffer immensely. This is but an example of apathy by the city corporation authorities.

With the monsoon approaching, the rainwater causes portions of the garbage to fall back into the drain and then whatever remains of it forms a muddy sludge spreading across the street, making it nearly impossible for the commuters to move about. While the workers did a fine job of cleaning the drains preventing them from clogging up with rubbish, their negligence to properly dispose of the lifted waste is a common practice—not just in Chattogram—which is simply uncalled for, as it poses grave threats to public health as well as the environment.

A CCC officer's justification—that the waste has been left by the roadside so that it can dry up or else it would make the roads muddy if it is carried away—seems to be ludicrously impractical. The CCC simply cannot shrug off their responsibility like this given that they have already earned a reputation for leaving garbage on the streets for days and sometimes even weeks. Such flagrant disregard for the environment and public health by the city authorities is unacceptable. The CCC must solve this problem urgently as it is clearly causing public sufferings and address the lack of coordination and supervision between different segments of the corporation that is reportedly causing the delay.

## LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

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### Prices of electricity and water must not be increased

As per recent reports, the price of electricity will rise by 5.3 percent, where each unit of electricity will cost Tk 7.13, effective from March 1. Additionally, WASA has proposed increasing its tariff by 80 percent for residential and commercial use, charging Tk 20 for each unit (1000 litres) instead of the current price of Tk 11.57.

The prices of essentials in Bangladesh are already costly. At the beginning of July 2019, the government had hiked the price of gas for all users by 32.8 percent. Now that the government has decided to raise the price of electricity, it will further burden our lives. The government should reconsider increasing the prices of such essential utilities. I think instead of taking such decisions, it should instead pay heed to the alarming number of deaths caused by road crashes, fire outbreaks and other calamities that take lives.

Nur Jahan, Chattogram

# Should women alone bear the burden of unpaid work?

While recognising women's unpaid work is absolutely necessary, reducing the burden on them by redistributing the bulk of unpaid work is a prerequisite for more women to enter the workforce.



NAZNIN TITHI

FOR Nasima Begum, a 40-year-old who works as a domestic help in the capital's Mirpur area, balancing between her paid and unpaid works has become a daily battle ever since she came to Dhaka in search of a livelihood. Hailing from a village in Barishal, she finds it extremely difficult to run her six-member family with the meagre amount she earns from working in three different households. While poverty has forced her to marry her two daughters off at an early age, she still has to feed the remaining two daughters and two sons who stay with her. Her husband, a tile fitter who often remains unemployed, hardly takes care of their 3-year-old son, let alone doing any household chores.

As I listened to her story when she came to work at our house, I was shocked to learn how little she earns after toiling from morning till night. According to her, after waking up at the break of dawn, she does the cleaning, washing and cooking for her own family. Then she has to cook for her elder brother's family (since his wife lives away in the village). And from midday till night, she works as a *chhuta bua* (part-time domestic help) in different households.

Even though she doesn't like to work as a domestic help and wishes to work in a garment factory instead, her responsibility at home has always been a barrier to her doing so. What is even more frustrating is that, after getting a job at a childcare centre in a garment factory for a monthly salary of Tk 12,000 recently, she couldn't join there. The authorities there did not allow her to keep her 3-year-old son at the childcare centre citing "many" problems. And since it was an eight-to-eight job, it was not possible for her to take it leaving her son at home for such a long time. The result is, she is now stuck with her old job as a domestic help, struggling to make both ends meet.

Nasima's story represents the struggle of thousands of women who come to the capital in search of a livelihood but fail to get a job being stuck between daily household chores and caring for their children, eventually being forced to work as domestic helps for minimum pay.

The vast majority of women in our villages have also never earned a single penny in their entire life, despite the fact that they are doing all the work at home and also taking part in the farming

activities.

An ActionAid Bangladesh study titled "Time Use of Adult Women and Men in Rural North: Pattern and Trend", done in Gaibandha and Lalmonirhat in 2015, has found that women spend five times more time on unpaid household chores than men, which remains unrecognised both at family and national levels. Women devote an average of 6.45 hours to care work at home compared to men's average of 1.2 hours a day. As the study found, most of women's unpaid work involves cooking. And unbelievable as it may sound, a 72-year-old woman would spend 12 years of her life just on cooking.

anything. In addition, to balance between their jobs and care work, women often go for low-paid and part-time jobs.

According to an IMF working paper titled "Reducing and Redistributing Unpaid Work: Stronger Policies to Support Gender Equality," for women who do paid work, "occupational downgrading" is common as women choose jobs at a lower skill level or engage in part-time work to balance paid and care work. Also, "women's higher prevalence in part-time work arrangements is one of the key drivers of observed gender wage gaps, creating a feedback loop for gender inequality in

families which puts the entire burden of household work on women, lack of safety in public places and public transports, as well as men's lack of willingness to share the household chores with women because these works are not compensated by wage.

As women, both urban and rural, get stuck at their homes doing everyday household chores and caring for their children, they lose their dignity and self-respect in the process. Because their unpaid work—which contributes significantly to the economy (A study by South Asian Network on Economic Modelling (Sanem) finds that if monetised, the value of women's unpaid work would be 40 percent of the GDP)—is neither valued by their family members nor by the society at large.

So it's imperative that the government formally recognises the value of women's unpaid work and their family members, particularly men, are sensitised about the issue. However, only recognition is not enough to improve women's status in family and society; the burden of unpaid work on women needs to be reduced by redistributing the work and changing the social and cultural attitude towards women's role in society.

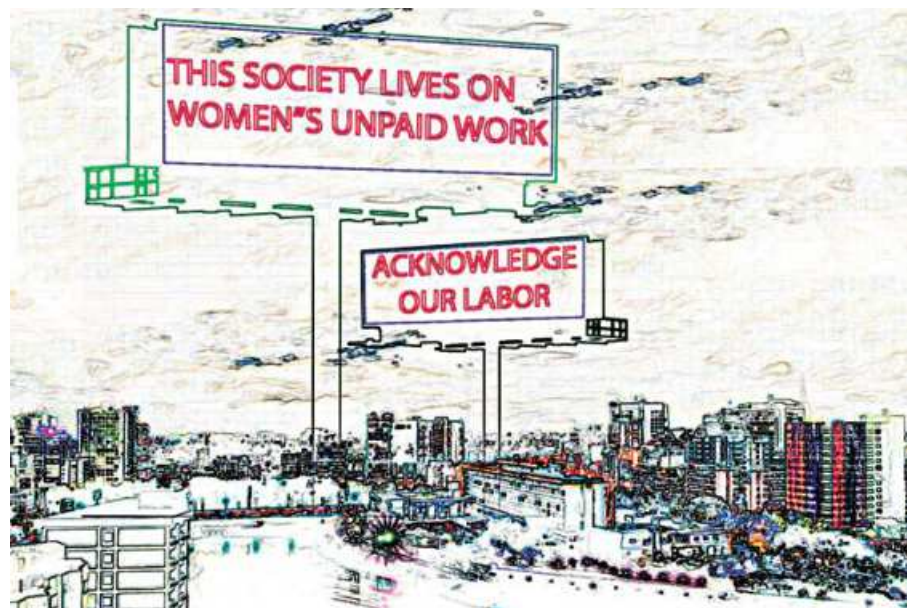
We need stronger policies to address the specific challenges faced by women to help them enter the job market.

The IMF study has come up with some policy decisions that can be considered by our government to reduce women's unaccounted work and increase their participation in the workforce.

Since social perception has a great influence on women's employment decisions, the government needs to work in that area with assistance from the private sector. The IMF study has also found that only women with higher education can substitute unpaid work with paid work to some extent, meaning that investing in girls' education is crucial. Moreover, investing in care services and reducing care burdens can potentially increase women's labour force participation, particularly in the urban areas. Also, family-friendly policies with flexible work arrangements and adequate social security services can help women join and stay in the labour force.

"Recognise, reduce and redistribute"—this can be our motto as we go about addressing women's unpaid work and increasing their participation in the workforce.

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Collage-illustration by Kazi Tahsin Agaz Apurbo

The situation of the urban middle-class women is not any better when it comes to doing unpaid work. I personally know a number of women who, despite having obtained the highest academic degrees from reputed public universities, could not enter the job market, or in cases where they did join a job, couldn't continue with it only because there was no one in the family to take care of their children. And when it came to leaving the job for the sake of their children, it's always the women who had to make the compromise even if both partners' monthly income was more or less similar.

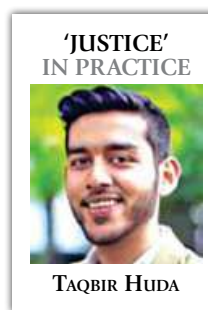
Strangely enough, women who overcome all these barriers to continue with their jobs still have to do the bulk of everyday chores. In cases where men share some of the work with their partners, when it comes to taking care of the children and the elderly, they hardly do

unpaid work."

Research also shows that the percentage of urban women joining the workforce is less than that of rural women, and although more women are now joining the workforce, most of the jobs that they do are informal and low-paid. At a recent discussion held at *The Daily Star*, Fahmida Khatun, an economist and Executive Director at Centre for Policy Dialogue (CPD), observed, "In 1974, women's participation in the labour force was only around 4 percent. But it has now increased to around 35 percent, according to the 2016-17 Labour Force Survey. However, these women are mostly engaged in low-paid jobs and 89 percent of them are in the informal sector."

As researchers have pointed out, the reasons why it is being more difficult for urban women to join the workforce are: not having day-care centres at the workplace, an increase in nuclear

## We have laws but why don't they work?



TAQBIR HUDA

THIS year's International Women's Day, as the ones before it, comes with a reminder that the culture of impunity for violence against women (VAW) continues to be a concern, despite there being a myriad of laws that are meant to counter VAW in our country.

Originally, the Penal Code 1860, which was passed by the British colonial rulers and subsequently retained by Bangladesh upon independence, dealt with the majority of crimes including most forms of violence against women (except, for instance, child marriage). Two decades after our independence, lawmakers actively started passing special laws to counter violence against women (all of which still remain in force, save the first three): the Dowry Prohibition Act in 1980 (now repealed), the Cruelty to Women (Deterrent and Punishment) Ordinance in 1983, the Nari o Shishu Nirjatan Daman (Bishesh Bidhan) Ain in 1995, Nari o Shishu Nirjatan Daman Ain in 2000, Acid Violence Act in 2002, Domestic Violence (Prevention and Protection) Act in 2010, Prevention and Suppression of Human Trafficking Act in 2012, Pornography Control Act 2012, Child Marriage Restraint Act in 2017, and Dowry Prohibition Act in 2018.

This trajectory of laws will give the impression that countering violence against women has always been a priority for successive governments. So the question that naturally arises is: if we have so many laws that seek to eradicate violence against women in all its forms, then why are incidents still so high?

One of the major obstacles in measuring the effectiveness of legal intervention vis-à-vis violence against women is the fact that there are no national official statistics on crimes that constitute such violence in Bangladesh

(for example, rape, domestic violence, etc.). Even if such statistics are there, those have not been made publicly accessible. While some statistics have been disclosed in government reports or ad hoc press statements by government officials (e.g. the total number of rape cases filed between 2014 and 2017), the data is typically a lump sum and not disaggregated. Similarly, while the official Bangladesh Police website does provide crime statistics which is disaggregated by year, it lumps, rather unhelpfully, all violence against women cases under an umbrella category termed "woman and child repression" cases (presumably denoting the total number of cases filed under the Nari o Shishu Nirjatan Daman Ain 2000). This figure could easily be (and should be) disaggregated by the specific type of crime and the district in which it was committed. Additionally, although the Ministry of Women and Children Affairs, in furtherance of the multi-million dollar Multi-Sectoral Programme on Violence Against Women (MSPVAW), was meant to develop a National Database on Violence Against Women, it is now in its twentieth (and penultimate) year of operation, and the database is still said to be "under construction" on the official MSPVAW website.

Therefore, we have to rely on unofficial statistics, such as that of rights bodies like Ain O Salish Kendra (ASK) which primarily records rape statistics on the basis of scanning nine daily newspapers in the country. ASK statistics for rape in 2019 (1413) is nearly double that of 2018 (732). We do not know if this is because the number of rape incidents actually doubled across the country, or whether the nine newspapers that ASK scans just so happened to report rape incidents with more frequency (because, for instance, sexual violence was more topical in 2019 than 2018 due to the much-discussed case of Nusrat Jahan Rafi). Therefore, it is imperative that the government should provide us with official rape statistics by launching the much-anticipated VAW

database and disaggregating the police cases as aforementioned.

Despite the data gap, there are obvious hurdles in our legal system that prevent VAW victims from seeking justice. First and foremost, our institutions, which serve as the entry point for victims who wish to seek justice, lack gender sensitivity. For most VAW victims, going to a mostly male (if not all-male) police station to report and narrate the details of the crime, especially if it is of a sexual nature, is a daunting experience. This is typically followed by intrusive and intimate medical exams in crowded

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rooms, which often take place without the victim's express and informed consent. Second, due to the social stigma attached, victims of VAW wish to have a quick and discrete remedy. Filing court cases does the exact opposite: it goes on for years, if not decades, due to seemingly endless adjournments and deferred hearings due to non-appearance of witnesses and it has a tendency to generate publicity. Third, even if a VAW victim is willing to battle years of litigation, they may face threats to their safety from the perpetrator's side (who are typically more powerful) and constantly live under fear of reprisal and revenge due to the lack of a victim

protection system. Fourth, if the trial does proceed smoothly, the unabashed moral policing of victims by the defence in an open court may make the victims feel as though they have been put on trial, and not the accused perpetrator.

It is clear, therefore, that the process of seeking justice is re-traumatising for a VAW victim throughout. The first problem can only be solved through thorough and comprehensive gender sensitivity training of police officers and relevant medical professionals and ensuring the presence of round-the-clock female police officers and social workers. An online complaints mechanism could also be developed whereby victims can submit their first information report (FIR) in writing. The solution to the second problem already exists to a large extent in the Nari o Shishu Nirjatan Daman Ain 2000, as it mandated that all VAW trials be concluded within 180 days, while it also introduced closed-door examination of rape victims by the court. Neither of these are met in practice. Furthermore, camera trials could be introduced for VAW cases. The third problem can be mitigated if the Witness and Victim Protection Law, which was drafted by the Law Commission 14 years ago, is finally passed and a witness protection scheme is activated at the upazila level. The fourth problem can be solved by prohibiting the admissibility of character evidence in VAW cases by amending the Evidence Act 1872 accordingly. Finally, the data gap must be overcome if we wish to be able to meaningfully measure successes in countering VAW.

However, if patriarchal social norms continue to remain in place, no amount of legal intervention can ever truly address violence against women. However, the solutions proposed to the four key problems presented above will go a long way in at least piercing the longstanding culture of impunity.

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