

What about workers in the informal sector?



THE present pandemic COVID-19 has created havoc in the world throwing millions out of jobs and means of livelihoods. Countries rich or poor are struggling to cope and survive as infections and death rates soar.

It has created disruptions as never witnessed after the Second World War. Rich countries such as UK, US and the EU have allocated millions, billions and even trillions of dollars to offset the catastrophe suffered by businesses, joblessness and other major disruption to people's lives.

Bangladesh is no exception, although our rate of infection and death is low compared to many countries, the impact on the lives of people specially from low income groups is evident with schools, business houses, restaurants and shops closed, leaving thousands without any means of earning. The garment industry which hires about 5 million workers, mostly women, have been given a lifeline to offset massive cancellation of orders. Special incentive package has also been offered for the rural poor and massive relief operation such as distribution of food has started. The government is keen to see that the pandemic does not have an adverse impact on the poorest.

However, it is the workers in the informal sector who are left more vulnerable than others and merits our attention. The Labour Law of 2006 is a comprehensive one which was further refined in 2010, 2013 and 2018 providing detailed guidelines for the workers-employers relations and benefits. However, the informal sector workers are not included. The Bangladesh Worker Welfare Foundation Act 2006 defines informal sector as those "private bodies where the terms and conditions of employment of workers and other relevant issues are not determined or guided by the provisions of the existing Labour Act, Rules or Policy, promulgated thereunder, and where there is very limited



The informal sector accounts for almost 89 percent of total national employment which is about 64 million people.

PHOTO: PRABIR DAS

scope for the workers to be unionised". This Foundation was created specifically to come to the aid of all workers, whether formal or informal in case of emergencies for them and their dependents. Although the National Labour Policy 2006 mentions workers of the informal sector as a huge working force whose skills need to be developed, quote: "One of the important duties of the Government is to ensure the rights and welfare of the Labourers. The Government, focusing on this target, shall take initiatives to enact necessary laws to upgrade the living standards of the huge number of people, working in the informal sector." However, this law is yet to be enacted as workers in the informal sector continue to be out of the purview of the Labour Law.

The present situation and especially

the lockdown (which was necessary) has put workers in the informal sector in a precarious situation. The informal sector accounts for 51.4 percent of total national employment which is about 64 million people. They are the rickshaw pullers, agriculture workers, construction workers, hawkers, rag pickers, transport workers, part time domestic workers, etc. (source: BBS). Child workers are included numbering around 4.8 million or 12.6 percent aged from 5 to 14. 83 percent are employed in rural and 17 percent in urban areas, they mostly work in the transport sector, as hawkers, rag pickers, in *biri* and welding factories, etc.

With schools and offices shut rickshaw pullers have no passengers, construction work has come to a halt therefore day labourers are sitting idle. Self-employed workers and

hawkers, both men and women who earn a living by selling food and other daily use items have no buyers. The disruption is total and widespread. While the well to do people are either working from home and spending time reading, exercising or meditating, the poor are waiting desperately for the situation to improve.

As we all know, women and children face a disproportionate brunt of any crisis be it war, social unrest or a pandemic like the present one. Women in the informal sector not only earn a living to support their families but also have to take care of their children. Given the closure of every means of livelihood, there is no alternative back up for them. Women headed households are in special jeopardy. Street and working children, boys and girls whose lives are already precarious

find themselves bereft of the little social support they had. Shelters, drop-in centres and other facilities have closed down. Their meagre earning is now nil. They have to go back to their families who have no means to support them. Adolescent girls and boys are particularly vulnerable and may fall prey to anti-social groups who will exploit them further.

Government relief initiatives are laudable, however, concern remains about coverage. What about the specially marginalised groups such as persons with disability, sex workers, minority population, people living in hard to reach areas and of course children? We know of the challenges surrounding proper targeting of the social safety net programmes. In this situation strategies to address different segments of the vulnerable population and a proper database is required. However, it should be noted people need more than just rice, dal and cooking oil to survive. They need cash to face the uncertain future such as sickness, accidents, etc.

Just as workers in the formal sector, informal sector workers need to be paid. Employers are urged not to deduct their salary during the present lockdown. The Workers Welfare Foundation mandated to respond to emergencies should transfer to them cash equivalent of two month's salary. City corporations and local authorities can issue ration cards for three months. Social safety net programmes should cover informal workers also. Collaboration with the NGO sector, many already in the field, will assist government to accelerate relief efforts. The Social Welfare Department is especially urged to take responsibility for working and street children. All initiatives have to be undertaken on an emergency basis as seven days of lockdown has passed compromising food intake and health status of millions.

It is the workers in the informal sector who keep our domestic economy moving. Just think what would happen if all such workers stopped working for a day. In this time of crisis, they deserve our special attention.

Shaheen Anam is Executive Director, Manusher Jonno Foundation.

Free flow of information in the time of COVID-19

FARUQ FAISEL

TODAY the whole world is struggling to manage the global crisis of COVID-19 and Bangladesh has been listed as one of the 25 high risk countries.

In light of the growing disruptions caused by the COVID-19 pandemic, the monitors for freedom of expression and freedom of the media for the United Nations, the Inter-American Commission for Human Rights, and the Representative on Freedom of the Media of the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe issued a joint statement.

The statement says: "Human health depends not only on readily accessible health care. It also depends on access to accurate information about the nature of the threats and the means to protect oneself, one's family, and one's community. The right to freedom of expression, which includes the right to seek, receive and impart information and ideas of all kinds, regardless of frontiers, through any media, applies to everyone, everywhere, and may only be subject to narrow restrictions."

In this connection, they pointed out that it is essential that governments provide truthful information about the nature of the threat posed by the coronavirus. Governments everywhere are obligated under human rights law to provide reliable information in accessible formats to all. The statement clarified that the right of access to information means that governments must be making exceptional efforts to protect the work of journalists.

Independent journalism, citizen reporting, open public discourse and the free flow of information are indispensable in the global effort to counter COVID-19. Governments must develop policies and responses to the outbreak that embrace freedom of expression. The media and social media companies must also contribute to the fight against misinformation related to the COVID-19 crisis. Journalists should report accurately and without bias, investigate propaganda campaigns and official discrimination, and make sure there is the right of correction and reply.

Alongside other fundamental human

rights, the right to freedom of expression and information should provide the legal foundation for tackling the COVID-19 outbreak. During a public health crisis such as the COVID-19 outbreak, the free flow of information is critical. Viral epidemics and pandemics are by their nature diffuse events, impacting populations on a regional, national or global scale. State authorities cannot comprehensively monitor the spread of a virus and the emergence of new hotspots in real time. Instead, effective public health

the actions of policymakers. During the COVID-19 outbreak, public fears and frustrations have at times manifested in criticisms—both founded and unfounded—of state officials and critiques of government policies. State action to stifle criticism of public authorities is inconsistent with the right to freedom of expression.

The UN Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights has emphasised that information accessibility is a key component of the right to health. When states restrict

freedom of expression ensures that vital information collected by the public, journalists and local health officials reaches policymakers and other key stakeholders. The Special Rapporteur on the right to health has also emphasised the need for transparency in public health policy and the importance of information in holding policymakers accountable and empowering individuals to protect their own health. The Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights has likewise condemned the deliberate withholding or misrepresentation of information vital to health protection or treatment.

Misinformation represents a serious challenge in addressing a viral epidemic or other public health crisis. During the COVID-19 outbreak, individuals around the world have struggled to decipher fact from fiction. Some have embraced beliefs or practices that deepen, rather than mitigate, health risks. Governments are right to take the threat of misinformation seriously. They should develop policies to effectively halt the spread of myths and to counter deliberate disinformation campaigns. Misinformation not only disrupts public health efforts; it can lead to the violation of other human rights. Despite the threat posed by misinformation, any restrictions on the dissemination of supposedly false information must comply with the requirements of legality, legitimacy and necessity and proportionality.

Unfortunately, beyond merely embracing responses to misinformation that violate international human rights law, some states have also spread disinformation and propaganda themselves. During a public health crisis, government programmes and policies are closely scrutinised, and states often have an incentive to control narratives and shape perceptions of the performance of public authorities. Some states have been accused of covering up the spread of the virus or promoting falsehoods for political gain. State-sponsored misinformation is especially dangerous. It both erodes trust in state authorities and promotes misguided responses by the public and health officials. Nevertheless, government, politicians and ordinary citizens use the term to condemn opinions with which they disagree and to call

for restrictions on certain types of expression.

A free and independent media is especially important during a public health crisis such as the COVID-19 outbreak. The media plays a central role in providing information to people most likely to be affected. A free and independent media can monitor national and international responses to an outbreak and promote transparency and accountability in the delivery of necessary public health measures. The media can also serve to relay back key messages from those affected to policymakers and other important stakeholders. However, journalists have also at times failed to uphold the highest professional standards, reporting inaccurately or contributing to discriminatory narratives. Governments undermine their own ability to respond to COVID-19 when they attack journalists.

Social media platforms play an increasingly dominant role in facilitating communications, disseminating information and sharing opinions. Possibilities have been evident in the use of social media during the COVID-19 outbreak. Governments, health workers, communities and individuals have regularly turned to social media platforms to get essential information concerning the virus. However, they have also been confounded by the diverse and conflicting information found online.

At this time of crisis, government should use freedom of information legislation to facilitate access to public information, including by mandating disclosure of certain types of information and establishing a system for individuals and groups to request information from public bodies.

It is important that the public authorities ensure that they do not spread misinformation, and governments should abandon intentional propaganda or disinformation campaigns.

Governments should ensure strong protections for whistleblowers. Moreover, the authorities need to protect those raising concerns about government misconduct or policy failures relating to COVID-19.

Faruq Faisal is the South Asia Regional Director of the UK based international freedom of expression organisation, Article 19.



responses to epidemics and pandemics rely on monitoring and reporting by the general public. Journalists, researchers and public health professionals also play essential roles in tracing the spread of a virus. At the same time, individuals, doctors and epidemiologists cannot effectively protect themselves and others without access to accurate and up-to-date information from authorities. Official denials and withholding of information fuel viral epidemics.

Public health crises such as viral epidemics or pandemics often place a spotlight on

speech relating to health issues or block access to health-related information and do not publish health information proactively, populations suffer adverse health impacts and cannot fully enjoy the right to health.

The Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights has specifically warned against censoring health-related information or taking other steps to prevent public participation in public health conversations and initiatives. COVID-19, stifling public reporting of an outbreak hampers monitoring and response efforts. Conversely, protecting

QUOTABLE Quote

ANATOLE FRANCE
(1844-1924)
French writer.

An education isn't how much you have committed to memory, or even how much you know. It's being able to differentiate between what you know and what you don't.

CROSSWORD BY THOMAS JOSEPH

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25 Nation on the Black Sea

27 Piston connec-tor

28 Take offense at

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30 Nebraska city

31 Doughy ring

35 Bit of rind

36 Tavern order

38 Diner sandwich

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YESTERDAY'S ANSWERS

R	E	C	A	P	S	P	A	R
O	M	E	G	A	S	L	O	M
B	A	R	E	D	T	A	R	P
O	N	E	S	G	A	G	G	L
T	A	B	M	U	G	Y	E	S
S	T	R	E	A	M	E	R	
E	A	S	T	S	N	U	G	
M	O	B	R	O	T	R	O	E
A	M	A	Z	E	D	B	A	R
R	A	G	E	S	B	E	I	G
C	H	E	S	S	L	E	N	I
H	A	L	T	T	R	E	A	T

BEETLE BAILEY by Mort Walker

BABY BLUES by Kirkman & Scott