

Domestic abuse increasing during lockdown

Local public representatives must intervene

It is a horrifying reality that with lockdowns being enforced all around the world incidents of domestic abuse, sometimes even leading to death of the victims have increased. For many women and girls, their homes are the most unsafe because their abusers are their partners or other family members living with them. As lockdowns have been enforced all around the world to contain the spread of coronavirus, incidence of domestic abuse has increased. The UN Secretary General Antonio Guterres has called on governments to take urgent measures in tackling a "horrifying global surge" in domestic violence fuelled by worldwide lockdowns that seek to curb the spread of the new coronavirus. Manusher Jonno Foundation MJF has made a statement recently highlighting the situation of Bangladesh.

According to MJF, many girls and women are being subjected to domestic violence while they are confined to the home during lockdown and have no way of reporting the abuse or getting access to legal action. MJF states that 36 rape incidents occurred in March in Bogura, Jamalpur and Cox's Bazar, while more than 300 incidents of domestic abuse and violence occurred in these three districts during the same period.

Reiterating the UN Secretary General's call to all governments to incorporate preventing violence against women as a key part of their national plans for combating COVID-19, MJF has urged the Bangladesh government to do the same. One of the recommendations the organisation has given and one that should be implemented immediately is for local representatives to take proactive actions against such violence. The government can mobilise Domestic Violence Prevention Committees at all levels of local government to provide legal assistance to victims. Local representatives are taking many measures (for example through loudspeakers) to make people aware of how to protect themselves from COVID-19 and to stay at home during the lockdown. They therefore can also send messages through the same methods regarding the need to protect vulnerable members and warn people against domestic abuse.

At a time when women and girls are isolated even from neighbours and relatives, the local public officials can play an important role in sensitising communities about domestic abuse and intervening when necessary.

Regular patients being denied treatment?

Protocol for patient management crucial during pandemic

We are appalled by the tragic death of a 43-year-old woman and mother of three, after her family's desperate efforts to admit her at various hospitals went in vain. There have been other reports of similar situations in which hospitals turned down patients fearing they had COVID-19 because of the symptoms they displayed. It reveals a lack of protocol for patient management during this crisis.

A victim of hypertension, diabetes and sciatica, on March 31 the woman was taken to a hospital with mild fever where the doctor declared that her vitals showed signs of collapse along with respiratory distress. Fearing she could be infected with COVID-19, the hospital denied further diagnosis and treatment. Referred to another hospital by IEDCR, the family, upon reaching there, learnt that it could not provide ICU support to the patient and suggested that she be taken home and treated there instead. After multiple failed attempts by the family members to convince a few other hospitals over the phone to take her in, they returned home, where the patient's condition deteriorated. Distressed, the family took her to yet another hospital in an ambulance and waited 40 minutes as it was void of any emergency facility. As nothing was being done, they decided to take the patient back to the first hospital they went to. Upon reaching, there was no doctor in the emergency. Thirty excruciating minutes passed by when finally, a doctor attended only to inform them that the woman is no longer alive. A day after her death, IEDCR's test revealed that she did not have coronavirus.

Such tragedies are likely to continue as there are many patients with serious medical issues that need immediate hospital care. To tackle the ongoing crisis, it is essential that the government must enforce directives to all hospitals on the protocol of handling patients efficiently, which they must abide by. Lack of testing facilities and proper protective gear at various hospitals have become life-threatening obstacles. Therefore, it is of utmost importance that most, if not all, hospitals should be equipped to take the necessary actions instead of ignoring the wellbeing of patients, and the doctors on duty be alert around the clock. As COVID-19 cases go up we need more designated medical facilities like Kurmitola General Hospital and Kuwait-Maitree Hospital that specialise in treating patients who are COVID-19 positive or are symptomatic. Admittedly this is challenging given the scarcity of medical facilities. But the government must set up separate facilities in existing buildings that are empty on an emergency basis as other countries have done to accommodate the growing numbers of patients infected with the virus. Meanwhile other hospitals should be able to treat regular patients without the possibility of staff or patients contracting COVID-19. Patients requiring critical care must not be turned away under any circumstances.

Ice Age: Corona Consequence

BLOWN' IN THE WIND



SHAMSAD MORTUZA

HOW will the world look like once this not-so-coveted Covid-19 crisis is over? Is this pandemic a virus-driven Ice Age that will change the world the way we know it? Can we ever go back to being normal? Or are we going to have "the new normal"?

Let's look at China where things are supposedly beginning to look normal. China was the first country to be hit by the disease tornado. The eye of the storm has shifted elsewhere, and China has begun to regain some of its composure. Large scale lay-offs is looming large as the country deals with the changes in its consumer behaviour, service sector and digital norms. Once we thaw from this frozen life, we too will be affected by these sectoral changes. Let us then pay heed to them.

Consumer behaviour has changed as more and more people now want contactless service. During the lockdown period, people have made cooking as part of their daily routine. They have realised the importance of spending more time at home with their families. In the process, people have changed their habits of eating out. It is predicted that 50 percent of the restaurants run the risks of being shut down. Of course, people will return to the eateries, but they are going to be careful and circumspect about being in a crowd. Social distancing is going to be an ingrained habit, and its impact will be felt everywhere.

The service sector has already redefined itself during this crisis. Uber in China shifted its gear to reach to the clients who were afraid of ride-sharing, but needed delivery service. The improvement and reliance on delivery service may change the nature of physical grocery stores. We have already seen how Foodpanda in Bangladesh has added "stores" and "contactless payments" to its features. The trend to bring service to your doors can be the other new normal.

The most important change has come in the digital sector. Technology has proved to be the greatest ally of man in isolation. Particularly, Information Technology has kept everyone connected during this period of quarantine. Sure enough there are going to be huge investments and

innovations in IT. The weakness of having to rely on physical labour during the time of epidemic will see further expansions in automation. All the signs suggest: we are at the threshold of redefining our human identity and nature. Where do we go from here? One fear is de-globalisation. The crisis exposed the raw nerves of global supply chains. Countries have to respond to long periods of economic self-isolation. The fear of the next pandemic and nationalistic reflexes in dealing with the crisis have given birth to a type of xenophobia, which can be the topic for another time. It is a forest out there. Let me rather focus on a tree: Bangladesh.

Understandably, all our efforts so far have been on the crisis management. We want to mitigate the onslaught of the disease by flattening the curves of infection and tackle the adverse economic impact from the lockdowns by providing some financial cushions. Such attempt has divided us into two groups: the essential workers and non-essential ones. Those who are at the front-line of the crisis will surely deserve more attention in the future. At the same time, there will be attempts to make the non-essentials a bit more productive in any future crisis. Having said that, it is equally important that we do an inventory of our essential workers.

We will do ourselves a favour by asking why and how the Hippocratic Oath of some of our doctors became a hypocritical one. What made some private hospitals and pathological laboratories close themselves at this time of need? How come some hospitals fired health staff and stopped offering services? Maybe time has come to rethink our health sector. I know how hundreds of people with dual nationalities fled the country at the first sign of crisis. They wanted to be in a country with reliable medical facility. I know that there are many who sought chartered planes to get out of the country hoping to get better treatment abroad. Each year, health tourists from our countries spend millions of takas abroad. After the series of petrol bomb attacks, we saw the development of an international standard burn unit. One can only hope that the nudge from the tiny virus will yield the improvement of our health sector. The right to medical care is guaranteed in our constitution under Clause 15. So are our other basic rights: "the provision of the basic necessities of life, including food, clothing, shelter, education and medical care."

It is heartbreaking to see that our farmers and producers are not getting the right price during this crisis. Chicken are being killed or milk being thrown away. The production cost of a broiler hen weighing one kg is Tk 90, whereas the producers are forced to sell it for Tk 40. That does not stop the supermarkets from selling the chicken for Tk 150/kg or more. Surely, there could be an emergency distribution chain, where the government could have purchased these products as part of its food camps and distributed them among the protein deficient people who are being locked down.

In the clothing sector, the farce that the country witnessed, thanks to the whim of BGMEA, is beyond comprehension. Making thousands of people walk miles and forcing them to go back was a criminal callousness. The marathon of the workers however shows how desperate people are for their jobs. If the State fails to protect them, where will these people go? What survival methods will they adopt? And how will they affect the securities? For the security of the state, their jobs need to be secured. Will the threat of automation widen the wage gap further and push these downtrodden people to stare down the barrel? In response, the state may either beef up its security forces to oppress the mass or adopt a humanitarian approach involving both the workers who have returned from abroad and those who are working here. We need to enhance our manufacturing sector. The participation of the labour force in the manufacturing sector can only be enhanced once we start innovating products of our own. We need to think beyond the order of foreign buyers and cut-and-stitch according to the designs provided by the retail outlets. We need massive growth in R&D.

Any five-year-old can produce hand sanitizers looking at a Youtube video—yet it became a national news when our premium educational institute did so. It shows how impoverished we are as a nation—intellectually. We did not sequence the virus. We did not research for remedies. We simply kept on forwarding memes and attachments. And found comfort in making sanitizers.

The last sector, education, with which I am involved, shows signs of inefficiencies and incompetence that persist everywhere. We have failed to rise to the occasion (I do not count myself out of it). The public university system relies on aged, lecture-based approaches to teaching, entrenched

institutional biases, and outmoded classrooms. At the first sign of danger, the public universities resorted to a reactive stance: complete closures. Some of the private universities tried to be pro-active in offering a low-diet online support, using digital platforms as a temporary solution to the crisis. The University Grants Commission, as whimsical as BGMEA, first supported online classes and then backed off by saying there should not be any final exams based on online classes. Funnily enough, it is UGC experts who went round campuses to parrot World Bank mantra of quality education and preached about making formative tests such as quizzes, tests and assignments as part of the summative assessment. Not only that, instead of taking a pioneering role in making sure that institutions across the board have the digital interface to be plugged in with the global reality, UGC took a populist position of playing second fiddle to media reports—managing to instigate our students who are uncomfortable with the online system.

Of course the system has its ills. The stop-gap solution to migrate to a low-bandwidth online teaching suffered greatly from the country's internet penetration. Judging from the reaction of some of our students who went outside of Dhaka, we woke up to a new realisation that has been already foreseen by World Economic Forum: "the less affluent and digitally savvy individual families are, the further their students are left behind. When classes transition online, these children lose out because of the cost of digital devices and data plans."

The Ministry of Education has decided to use BTV to develop education materials for schools. One can only hope that UGC will come forward to develop an education platform and facilitate public private partnership. It will be foolish to hold on to pre-COVID categorisation. Time is ripe for UGC to bring in tele-companies, publishers, media outlets on board to build a resilient system that can withstand any future blow.

We are frozen. We are experiencing a virus-driven ice age that has forced us to cocoon ourselves. We want to come out of our shells and fly in the sky of a brave new world.

Shamsad Mortuza is a professor of English, University of Dhaka (now on leave). Currently, he is Pro-Vice-Chancellor of ULAB. Email: shamsad71@hotmail.com

Credible media vital in fight against COVID-19 and fake news epidemic



WARREN FERNANDEZ

AS the coronavirus continues its relentless spread across the world, infecting over a million people and killing tens of thousands, news stories of lockdowns, social distancing and overwhelmed hospitals have been making the headlines just about everywhere.

Newsrooms have been working overtime to keep the communities they serve updated. Audiences have surged. Apart from news reports, people are turning to analysis and commentaries, videos and explainers, to help them make sense of the fast-evolving and far-reaching crisis.

Amid the welter of information swirling about on social media, professional newsrooms which have long invested in building expertise, have been meeting the public's hunger for objective reporting, based on journalists speaking to informed sources, providing context and perspective, drawing on historical knowledge and institutional memory.

These have also helped inoculate communities against that other virus that is on the rampage—fake news—which is sowing anxiety and confusion, as well as undermining the public's trust in the reliability of information they receive at this critical time.

In the process, some reporters have succumbed to the virus while on the job, having to be isolated and quarantined. Some newsrooms have had to evacuate hurriedly, with staff rushing home, laptops in hand, to try to keep their platforms updated and the presses rolling.

But here's the heart-breaking news: among the victims in the intensive care unit, gasping for breath, are some of the media organisations themselves, alongside many others from sectors that have also been hard hit, from aviation to retail.

Several, especially local and vernacular titles, might not be able to meet their financial commitments, or even pay staff salaries, in the months ahead.

Advertising is drying up, plunging by between 30 percent and 80 percent, according to a recent survey by the World Association of News Publishers. Revenues from media-related events, a new and growing source of funds, have also plunged, as social distancing measures are put in place.

Many newsrooms have also made content on the pandemic freely available, as a public service, thereby constraining their ability to grow revenues from subscriptions.

The upshot of this is both ironic and tragic: at a time when audiences are

turning increasingly to established media titles, as recent surveys have shown, newsrooms are seeing their resources gutted, and some are even being shut.

In the United States, Gannett, the largest American newspaper chain, announced last week plans to cut salaries and lay-off some staff temporarily, while Rupert Murdoch's News Corp has said it will stop print editions of 60 newspapers in Australia, with similar measures being taken in the United Kingdom and elsewhere.

This has heightened concerns about the emergence of "news deserts" — communities with no access to local government and community news as media groups cease to exist there.

There is also much angst over "ghost newsrooms," titles which are snapped up by investors as they are still profitable, who then slash their reporting capabilities

delivered by private means...People would pay for a newspaper and (there was also) advertising revenue. The Internet has just knocked away both these pillars. So the newspapers produce the information. Facebook and Google get the profit.

"And this has a very negative effect on the newspapers on which we have relied for our news...The amount of serious news, investigative journalism and foreign reporting is going down because that's expensive.

"This is a real problem for the journalism we need for democracy."

COVID-19, however, has mercilessly compounded this challenge and hastened both the shift to digital and the plunge in advertising.

So, is there an antidote to the virus-induced media malaise? Among the proposals that media leaders have been making urgently to their stakeholders are



Among the victims in the intensive care unit, gasping for breath, are some of the media organisations themselves. PHOTO: REUTERS

to boost margins, resulting in a lack of resources to produce local, original or independent content.

The implications of these developments for society are grave. At a time when communities are most in need of critical information, many newsrooms are increasingly hampered and finding it harder to deliver on their mission.

This has led the World Health Organisation to warn of a coming "infodemic," with misinformation spreading and undermining public trust at a crucial time.

To be sure, the financial struggles faced by newsrooms is hardly news. Oxford historian Timothy Garton Ash pointed to this in a keynote address at the St Gallen Symposium in Switzerland in May 2017.

He said: "Very simply, the Internet is destroying the business model of newspapers. For at least two centuries, we have had a public good—news, the information we need for democracy—

these: Declaring the media an essential service: to enable journalists to go about their jobs during lockdowns, keeping newsrooms functioning and news agents running.

Granting financial assistance: these include tax breaks or holidays, short-term loans and wage subsidies to help newsrooms pay their staff and bills in the face of falling revenues. Denmark has set up a 25 million euro fund which will grant news outlets that have recently seen revenues fall by between 30 percent and 50 percent relief of up to 60 percent of their losses, while in Lithuania, state subsidies are also given for critical infrastructure such as broadcasting and printing facilities.

Giving tax incentives for advertisers and subscribers: In Italy, advertisers are given tax deductions of 30 percent of their spending in newspapers and online, while Canada allows subscribers to news titles to claim tax relief.

Stepping up government advertising:

public education campaigns tied to the pandemic can help make up for the fall in private advertising.

Making Big Tech pay: Technology platforms should be pressed, as France has done, to make more meaningful contributions to the news outlets they rely on for content.

But while these steps might see media groups through the crisis, they are not without risks. Not least of which is the damage that could be done to the credibility of the media if it becomes overly dependent on state funding. This is especially a concern in societies with painful experiences of governments seeking to muzzle the media, through cuts in funding and advertising, shutdowns of newsrooms and even arrests of journalists.

To safeguard against this, beyond the crisis, new business models will also have to be fashioned to ensure the media remains viable and sustainable for the long haul.

Various experiments are now underway. While some big players like The New York Times and Financial Times are growing subscription revenues from readers, others such as The Washington Post, the South China Morning Post and Los Angeles Times, have been bought by wealthy business leaders, who have given these newsrooms a boost, by investing in journalism and technology.

Elsewhere, media groups have been given mandates by the state, with funding for public service broadcasts and journalism, as in France, Britain and the Scandinavian countries.

Some newsrooms have opted to be public trusts or not-for-profit companies, with a mission to provide public service journalism, such as the Guardian in the UK, and The Philadelphia Inquirer and The Salt Lake Tribune in the US, and also Japan's Nikkei group.

Which of these models works best remains unclear; nor perhaps is there likely to be one model that works for all, given the very different political histories and cultures that newsrooms operate in around the world.

This much is certain: the coronavirus pandemic might have begun as a public health crisis. But some wrenching economic, social and political changes could follow in the months to come.

People and communities will need to make sense of developments unfolding around them as well as to figure out the way forward. To do so, citizens and voters will need news organisations they consider credible, which they can rely on, and trust.

Warren Fernandez is Editor in Chief of The Straits Times and President of the World Editors Forum (WEF), a network of editors that is part of WAN-IFRA, the World Association of News Publishers. This opinion piece was signed and endorsed by members of the Board of the WEF, in solidarity with newsrooms around the world.