

## The rich and influential creep into relief list!

Even a pandemic does not stop them

A report in this daily about the name of the industries and commerce affairs secretary of Brahmanbaria Awami League being in the list of “beneficiaries” of the government’s open market sales (OMS), which targets the poorest and most vulnerable sections of society, has left us stupefied. More so because, in the list, there are also the names of more than a dozen of his relatives. The OMS programme offers a subsidised rate of TK 10 per kg of rice to those affected by loss of income during this pandemic, including beggars, transport workers, rickshaw-van pullers, day labourers, tea stall workers and members of the third gender community. The person in question has numerous other flashy titles such as member of the central FBCCI (Federation of Bangladesh Chambers of Commerce and Industries) and general secretary of Restaurant Owners’ Association in Brahmanbaria. Most importantly, he is an OMS dealer himself.

Are we to believe that this person and his relatives are so poor that they can only buy rice at TK 10 per kg? There is little doubt that this is a gross example of the greed and dishonesty of some public officials who do not think twice about usurping what rightfully is entitled to the needy and vulnerable.

The worst part is that this is hardly a one-off anomaly. Names of 84 other people, who according to locals are affluent and do not need assistance, can be found in such lists in the municipality area. The allegations that the rich and influential, including ruling party members, were named in the OMS list prompted the district OMS programme authorities, headed by the Deputy Commissioner, to investigate the matter. We are thankful that this team unveiled this shocking irregularity in what was supposed to be an endeavour to alleviate the sufferings of low-income people who are now jobless. But it is still disturbing to know that there have been numerous other incidents of irregularities in various government relief programmes. According to a report, 49 public representatives have been suspended for relief distribution related irregularities during the pandemic. Meanwhile, the ACC has filed cases against 20 individuals including 14 local government representatives for their alleged involvement in misappropriation of subsidised rice meant for the poor and vulnerable.

The PM has repeatedly warned against such corruption but it seems such warnings have not been taken seriously by some public officials. As shameful as these revelations are, the government now must take a much harder line than it has against those who have been found guilty of using their political clout to grab government relief and make some money out of it at a time of national crisis. These individuals must be punished under the law and made an example of and those public bodies responsible for enabling the irregularities must be held accountable.

## Remarkable work by Bangladeshi scientists

Genome sequencing can help vaccine development

A team of Bangladeshi scientists at the Child Health Research Foundation (CHRF) led by Dr Senjuti Saha has successfully managed to complete the genome sequencing of SARS-CoV-2 virus in Bangladesh, as this newspaper reported on Thursday. It is a remarkable achievement that will play a significant role in developing a vaccine for this deadly virus. Vaccines will be injecting RNA of the virus into the body of patients to help it build antibodies against the disease. In order for it to work, the RNA in the vaccine needs to match the RNA of the particular virus strain.

As the strain of the virus constantly keeps mutating, it is necessary to know the type of virus strain hitting the country. Although the genome sequencing of the virus has been done thousands of times around the world, this is the first time it has been done in Bangladesh, getting us one step closer to knowing what type of particular vaccine is necessary to protect the people in this country. Furthermore, genome sequencing of the virus will help scientists determine which country it came from and when it came into Bangladesh, helping them make better predictions such as when the virus will reach its peak. The team of scientists has also made the sequencing protocol public, letting vaccine makers know what needs to be incorporated into their vaccine design, and giving other laboratories in the country a chance to use it to train themselves to start sequencing samples.

This achievement once again illustrates what our scientists can achieve with the right support. We hope the government takes notice of this and acknowledges the importance of what this group of bright scientists has managed to do. In order for scientists to follow up and accomplish crucial breakthroughs like this, they have to be supported financially and in other ways. This accomplishment provides further proof that increased support and investment in various scientific fields is justified and, in fact, a necessity—the times we live in demands it!

## LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

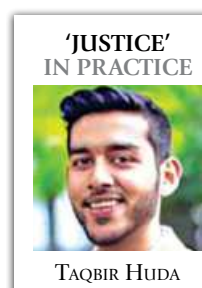
letters@thedailystar.net

### Take care of your mental health

When the lockdown first began, it seemed unusual but tolerable. Over time, it has proven to be challenging in many ways as we remain within the confines of our homes day in, day out. The unprecedented situation resulting from the pandemic has taken a toll on the mental health of many of us. And the overuse of digital gadgets is adding to the burden. Also consider the impact of the endless torrent of negative news coming every day. As a result, depression, stress, frustration and anxiety are becoming commonplace. We have to make conscious efforts to uplift our mood during these strange times. Whatever we do, we must ensure that we don’t let depression get the best of us.

Nawal Siddiqui, Chattogram

# Why we need to stop using the term ‘working mothers’



‘JUSTICE’ IN PRACTICE

TAQBIR HUDA

THE annual celebration of the Mother’s Day brings with it the usual outpouring of love and appreciation for the primary caregivers in our families, but it also tends to bring to the fore some of the deeply ingrained conceptions (and misconceptions) about motherhood in our society. One of the most common issues, of course, relates to how society distinguishes “working mothers” from the rest and continues to vilify them. While the vilification of working mothers is a social problem that needs to be uprooted, I would like to take this opportunity to take a step back and highlight a less obvious problem. I voice my contention with the unabated use of the exclusionary term “working mothers”—based on the very simple logic that all mothers work.

In creating a sub-category of mothers with the qualifying verb “working”, the implication, quite literally, is that mothers outside this category are somehow not “working”, even though they very much are. By labelling one end of this (socioeconomically constructed) binary as “working mothers”, we are naturally left with terms like “stay-at-home mothers” or “housewives” (which often comes with a tinge of condescension) in order to identify the remaining category of mothers. These terms, by tying such mothers to a state of passivity (“stay” or “home”), place in our heads this false image of inactivity and immobility, and therefore non-work.

The real differentiator between mothers is not whether they “work” or not (since it is pretty indisputable that there can be no motherhood without work)—it is whether they are getting paid for the work they are doing. So why the discrepancy?

To put it simply, “working mothers” get paid to do their work because their output is assigned an economic value in the hyper-capitalist world that we find ourselves in, while “stay-at-home mothers” are denied payment because the output of their work does not

immediately contribute to the holy grail of Gross Domestic Product at the end of that particular financial year (that magical formula that a group of mostly white, middle-aged men devised), and therefore is denied any economic and functional value.

This is not to say that the unpaid work that “stay-at-home mothers” do cannot be assigned an economic value, because feminist interventions in economics in recent times has shown that it very much can be attached to a monetary value. For instance, a report by the South Asian Network on Economic Modelling (SANEM) found that when the total unpaid work in Bangladesh was assigned an economic value, it made up over 48 percent of the country’s GDP in 2017. It also confirmed that the overwhelming majority of unpaid work in the country is conducted, unsurprisingly, by women.

Therefore, all mothers are quite literally “working mothers” and both groups do work that can be economically valued,

of women who do engage in paid work, not least because of the social stigma and guilt tripping they face every waking moment for “choosing a career over their children” (since many live in societies where the two c’s of adulthood—i.e. children and career—are, funnily enough, always mutually exclusive for the mother, but never for the father). So, to be clear, I am not in the slightest disputing the need for sub-categorising this group of mothers (so we are able to better highlight their experiences and struggles, etc.). I am merely proposing that we use an identifying term that does not, by default, peddle capitalist myths and deny recognition to the very real work done by the other category of mothers whose labour has long been denied any economic or functional value.

I also understand the absolute need to recognise that a good many stay-at-home mothers were simply never given the choice to have a career. But that does not mean we should refuse to grant due



There can be no motherhood without work.

PHOTO: ANISUR RAHMAN

but the free market economy dictates that only one group does work that ought to be economically valued and remunerated, while the work done by the other group should not.

I totally understand the need to have a specific term to identify the subcategory

recognition to the work they have to do, even if they had little or no choice in the matter. Nor should we ignore the reality that many mothers have fully exercised their own autonomy in choosing to maximise the time they spend with their children without it being superimposed.

## Palestine and the Nakba



SHAMSHER M CHOWDHURY

NAKBA Day signifies the date of the beginning of the forced Palestinian mass exodus from their land in 1948 by Israel. In Arabic, the word Nakba literally means “disaster”, “catastrophe”, or “cataclysm”. This occurred when more than 700,000 Palestinian Arabs—about half of pre-war Palestine’s Arab population—fled or were expelled from their homes during the 1948 Palestine war. Between 400 and 600 Palestinian villages were sacked during the war, while urban Palestine was almost entirely extinguished. “Nakba” also refers to the period of the war itself and events affecting Palestinians from December 1947 to January 1949.

The precise number of refugees, many of whom settled in refugee camps in neighbouring states, is still unknown. It can be safely assumed, however, that around 80 percent of the Arab inhabitants of what became Israel (half of the Arab total of Mandatory Palestine) left or were expelled from their homes. About 250,000-300,000 Palestinians fled or were expelled before the Israeli Declaration of Independence in May 1948.

Factors involved in the exodus include Jewish military advances, destruction of Arab villages, psychological warfare, and fears of another massacre by Zionist militias after the Deir Yassin massacre which caused many to leave out of panic. Other factors include direct expulsion orders by Israeli authorities, voluntary self-removal of the wealthier classes, absence of

an organised Palestinian leadership at that time, and an unwillingness to live under Jewish control. Any student of history will recall that the unprovoked Deir Yassin massacre took place on April 9, 1948, when around 120 fighters from the Zionist paramilitary groups Irgun and Lehi killed hundreds of Palestinian Arabs in Deir Yassin, a village of roughly 600 residents near Jerusalem.

Subsequently, a series of laws passed by the first Israeli government prevented

the support and solidarity of Bangladeshis for their Palestinian brothers and sisters in their struggle for justice and statehood are steeped in history. Since its very birth in 1971 as an independent state, people in Bangladesh have all along stood steadfastly with the just cause of the Palestinians. Bangladesh has not for once wavered in its stance, which is built on the universal principles of democracy, human rights, liberty, history and justice, the same values on which the glorious

indicted on corruption charges earlier this year, is the latest incarnation of this toxic mind-set. Sadly, he has sympathisers in the outside world as well. The powerful Zionist lobby ensures that. The most recent manifestation of that is the “dead on arrival” so-called Deal of the Century that validates aggression, illegal occupation and annexation coming out of the Trump administration. Even many Jews in Israel and outside laugh it off as a cruel joke. Bangladesh does not maintain any



Palestinian refugees leaving the Galilee in October-November 1948.

Arabs who had left from returning to their homes or claiming their property. Consequently, they and many of their descendants remain refugees till this day. The expulsion of the Palestinians has since been described by many historians as ethnic cleansing. The status of the refugees, and in particular Israel’s continuous and obstinate refusal to grant them their legitimate right to return to their homes or to be compensated, are key issues in the ongoing Israeli-Palestinian conflict. The events of 1948 are commemorated by Palestinians both in Palestine and elsewhere on May 15—now known as Nakba Day—the day after the Gregorian calendar date for Israeli independence (May 14, 1948) or Yom Ha’atzmaut in Hebrew. Nakba Day was inaugurated by Palestinian leader Yasser Arafat in 1998. The Palestinian conflict is arguably the longest running instance of injustice and human tragedy in modern history.

While many vested quarters would want to push any discourse on this conflict into the background, for the people of Bangladesh, it has a special place in their

Bangladesh War of Liberation was based. So deep was the commitment of Bangladesh to the just cause of Palestine and its people that even Israeli offers of assistance to Bangladesh during our war of independence in 1971 were summarily rejected by the Bangladeshi government-in-exile. The country staunchly supported the Palestinians against Israel during the Yom Kippur war in 1973 and dispatched a medical team and relief supplies for Palestinians even when the country itself was recovering from the ravages of the 1971 war. Firmly believing that the Palestinian struggle is also our struggle, about 8,000 Bangladeshi youths reportedly fought alongside the Palestinian people and sacrificed lives. Bangladesh recognised Palestine as a state very early on and maintains a warm and friendly relationship with it. In 1978, Bangladesh was elected by the OIC as the Vice President of the Al-Quds Committee.

Over time, hardliner Israeli leaders have sought to distort history and alter geography. Israel’s Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, who was formally

diplomatic relations with Israel and has consistently reiterated that it will not have diplomatic relations with Israel until there is an independent Palestine along the pre-1967-war border. While Bangladesh does not deny Israel’s right to exist as an independent state, it maintains that such a state can exist alongside an independent Palestine, in other words, Bangladesh stands for a two-state solution. A September 2011 statement published in the *Jerusalem Post* by an Israeli government spokesperson said, “We have no conflict with Bangladesh. We want dialogue. We want people-to-people relations.” Bangladesh Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina responded firmly, “We have been continuing our support to the Palestinians, and occupation of their land by the Israelis is never acceptable.” This is where Bangladesh stands and will continue to stand until such time as a just solution, ensuring the establishment of a Palestinian state acceptable to the people of Palestine, is found.

Shamsheer M Chowdhury, BB, is a former Foreign Secretary of Bangladesh.