

## Exorbitant oxygen bills putting extra burden on patients

*Government should fix the charges for oxygen and other essential support*

WE are shocked to learn that some private hospitals are charging patients higher than usual for oxygen support during a national health crisis. According to our report, as the number of patients needing oxygen has gone up with the rising number of Covid-19 cases, some private hospitals have taken this as an opportunity to make extra profit by charging the patients unreasonably high amounts for the oxygen support. While before the pandemic, the charges for per hour of oxygen ranged between Tk 100 and Tk 200, many private hospitals are now charging Tk 200 to Tk 400 for the same service. Reportedly, a private hospital in Chattogram has charged a patient Tk 3.05 lakh for giving her oxygen support for 10 days.

As we understand, this has been happening due to a lack of proper government policy and mechanisms to oversee the charges of essential medical services in private hospitals. In the absence of a regulatory mechanism, some hospitals have become very ruthless towards the patients when it comes to charging them for Covid-19 treatment. The hospitals, however, are blaming the increased cost of oxygen and other equipment for the higher bills.

We believe the government has a lot to do here. As a first step, to lessen the economic burden on patients, the government should immediately fix the charges of oxygen and other essential medical support and form a body to oversee that the hospitals comply with the government directives. If the hospitals' claim about the increase in oxygen and other necessary medical equipment's prices in the market is found to be true, the government should take action against those responsible for the price hikes through continuous monitoring of the market. Besides, it should consider giving subsidies to the private hospitals to ensure that the oxygen prices and treatment costs remain stable.

The DGHS director's (hospitals and clinics) comment in this regard is very unfortunate, as he claimed that he had not heard about any allegations of high oxygen bills. We expect that the government agencies concerned will stop being in denial mode when patients are finding it hard to bear the treatment cost of Covid-19 in private hospitals and do the needful to provide them some relief.

## Day labourers and others are facing hunger

*The govt must act now to save them*

A report in this paper yesterday highlighted the grim reality faced by day labourers as they wait indefinitely for jobs to come their way. Their lives have become acutely harder with the spread of Covid-19, leading to shutdowns and employment opportunities dwindling close to zero. Scenes of worried daily labourers gathering at various spots in the city, waiting to be hired and failing to get a job, have become common. Without these jobs, these labourers face going hungry with their families and possible eviction from their homes as they continue to pay the rent. Along with day labourers are rickshaw pullers, electricians, sanitary workers, hawkers and many others, who are now without any means to earn.

These are worrying signs and the government must take cognisance of a crisis that is already unfolding—the crisis of hunger among an increasing number of poor who have become poorer.

According to the report, many workers said they did not receive any government support since the outbreak of the pandemic. One worker said two individuals came to her home and collected the NID and phone numbers of her and her family members at least seven times over the last three months, claiming that this was for relief, but no such relief ever came. The secretary of the Ministry of Labour and Employment has said that there is no separate fund to help day labourers and that as shutdowns are relaxed, they will soon find jobs. But what happens till then? How are these day labourers and others in the informal sector supposed to feed themselves and their families? How will they pay the rent?

We are faced with a dire situation. Day labourers and many in the informal sector are the hardest hit by the economic fallout of the pandemic. Economists have pointed out that the pandemic has resulted in an increase in the number of urban poor who must now be included in social safety net programmes. Apart from targeting these new poor as well as those who were already poor, the government must make sure that the budget allocations are distributed properly.

The authorities must make accurate lists of these people and provide food and cash relief for them until jobs are available again. This means enforcing the zero tolerance policy for irregularities that so often end up sabotaging all relief efforts.

## LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

letters@thedailystar.net

### Ease internet access

While the debate over whether to conduct all academic classes over the internet amidst the pandemic remains prevalent, a major problem that stands as a barrier is the issue of affordability and access to uninterrupted internet connection. As many of our students come from rural areas, they don't have the opportunity to use the internet with ease. Where there is no connection of the basic wireless internet services, the students must opt for the data networks, which tend to be costly. As a student myself, I would like to humbly request the authorities to ensure internet access. Another feasible option could be to sign contracts with telecommunication companies to provide internet to students at a subsidised rate, which will benefit the pupils immensely.

Yeasin Arafat Razon, Dhaka

# Formalise the invisible workforce

*The pandemic can be an opportunity to review the rights of domestic workers across Bangladesh*



SHUPROVA TASNEEM

ON July 1, The Daily Star shared horrific pictures of the violence inflicted upon 14 year old Asma Khatun, a domestic worker employed in the capital's Uttara. A year ago, she had been employed for Tk 5,000 per month by Abu Taher and his wife, who promised to care for her "like their own daughter". No such thing happened of course, and she was made to work throughout the day, with barely any time for sleep. When the physical and emotional stress led to her making mistakes, she was verbally abused. After that, the beatings started, and it soon turned into torture—she was burned with cigarettes and hot oil, sometimes with dry chilli sprinkled onto her wounds. She was never given any access to healthcare, and they routinely stopped her from contacting her family.

Whenever we hear of a story like this, our first thought is—what sort of people torture and abuse a child, for whom, as employers, they have a duty of care? However, this is not the first time that we have been shocked by the cases of inhumane torture being inflicted on vulnerable young domestic workers. The question we must ask ourselves is not why, but how. How do we still have a sector of employment that is set up so that workers are at the mercy of their employers, dependant on their "kindness", with no way to claim their rights? And in the midst of the coronavirus pandemic, are domestic workers becoming even more vulnerable?

The informal nature of domestic work makes it extremely difficult to quantify the number of people actually employed in this sector in Bangladesh, leading to many rights organisations calling them the "invisible workforce". According to a 2006 study report of the International Labour Organization (ILO) Dhaka office, over two million domestic workers were estimated to be operating in Bangladesh in 2005, although this figure did not include workers operating in the Dhaka City Corporation areas, where a majority of them are located. Another research paper by Caribou Digital put the number of domestic workers at 10.5 million in 2019. An ILO survey (2019) conducted with 500 domestic workers showed that an overwhelming majority of domestic workers were women, and over one-fourth of them were children. This survey also confirmed what we already know about domestic work—low wages, long working hours, and the very real possibility of physical and mental abuse means that employment in this sector cannot be considered to be "decent work".

At an online seminar organised by domestic workers' rights organisation Suniti, speakers warned that during the pandemic, domestic workers are being pushed deeper into their already precarious situations. The pitfalls are

different for workers who live with their employers and workers who rent rooms, usually in slums, and travel to work. For live-in workers, there is a greater possibility of being forced to work harder and for longer hours, with less time for rest. There is also a higher chance of being emotionally and physically abused, for the same reasons that incidents of domestic violence have surged across the world (so much so that the UN Secretary General

these "part-time" domestic workers (although most of them work full-time hours) losing their jobs without notice. The fact that people have found it easier to let go of their domestic workers but not their chauffeurs or security guards, who are also "coming in from outside", is an example of the many gendered inequalities that are manifesting during the pandemic. According to data collected by Suniti from domestic workers from

even without concrete data—it is highly unlikely for a domestic worker to have enough savings to be able to survive the pandemic without monthly wages (more than one-third of domestic workers reported having debt burdens in the 2019 ILO survey), but it is even more unlikely for them to have the authority to ask their employers for wages and *not* come in to work. However, if the employers do get infected, domestic workers are usually the first to be suspected of spreading the infection.

In this scenario, what can we do to ensure that our domestic workers have greater agency and power to negotiate their rights? They say "charity begins at home" but it is this sense of "charity" that has been used by many to perpetuate a system of employment that is inherently oppressive. We have all heard the reasoning—"at least these children are protected from child marriage if they work in a house, at least these young girls are safer here instead of in a factory" and so on. However, cases like that of Asma Khatun make it clear that what these workers need is not charity, but proper legal and social protections and formal recognition of their labour as a crucial part of our economy.

With that in mind, the Bangladesh government adopted the Domestic Workers Protection and Welfare Policy in 2015. While the policy does recognise domestic work as a profession and gives guidelines regarding work conditions and benefits, it does not outline any minimum wage or working hours. The policy also allows for children as young as 12 to be employed, provided they are not engaged in heavy and dangerous work. Child labour is a complicated issue that cannot be rooted out in a day; nevertheless, as a country that is on its way to achieving middle income status, we need to do better—Bangladesh should no longer allow its children to be employed in a sector that is so notoriously difficult to monitor and where its workers are so prone to abuse.

While the policy is a step in the right direction, it is nowhere near enough to give domestic workers the protections they require. Since domestic workers are excluded from the Labour Act 2013, they do not have any legal rights and cannot be members of trade unions. Without this right to organise, these workers cannot demand their rights, and the vicious cycle continues. In the wake of the pandemic, there have been many debates regarding a new world order. Can we not break the cycle in this post-pandemic world? In the US, the National Domestic Workers Alliance has set up a coronavirus care fund that is providing emergency assistance to those who need it. We must do everything we can, not to help domestic workers with our "good intentions", but to facilitate the building of a similar alliance, so that the workers themselves can demand decent work and a life of dignity.

Shuprova Tasneem is a member of the editorial team at The Daily Star. Her Twitter handle is @ShuprovaTasneem.



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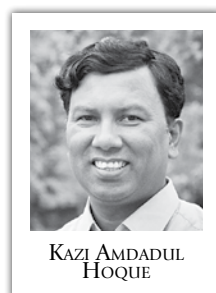
Antonio Guterres in April asked "all governments to put women's safety first as they respond to the pandemic". Live-in workers could also have their freedoms restricted and be forbidden from going outside or being near their families "for their own good". In all of these scenarios, the psychological trauma for child domestic workers (who almost always live with their employers) is likely to be far greater.

For workers who don't live with their employers, the greatest risk is the possibility of losing their livelihoods. While there is no clear data yet, there have already been multiple reports of

four areas in Dhaka, only 35 percent of respondents received any assistance, from public or private sectors, after losing their jobs, and whatever they received only lasted for a few days. Amidst this financial (and for many, food) crisis, 85 percent of respondents said they had been victims of domestic violence at home as a result of their loss of income.

The "general holiday" did not apply to part-time domestic workers who retained their jobs, and a majority of them were compelled to travel to work, putting themselves, their families and their employers at risk. The loss of autonomy in this top-down relationship is clear,

## Can we undo the harm we have done?



KAZI AMDADUL HOQUE

BACK in the day, when a child was born, the elders used to plant a tree in the baby's name, implying that the tree will grow with the baby and help the baby with fruit and shade when they grow up. The plant was nurtured and cared for, just like the newborn was nurtured and cared for. They said, a child and a plant can be no one's enemy. The two go hand in hand, in innocence and life.

The ecosystem is the source of food for almost all beings—human, plant and animal. The sea provides fish to humans, food for its sea creatures and a home for all life within it. The same goes for mountains, forests and beaches. The ecosystem also provides livelihoods for the people in it.

Times, however, have changed. The care that was once reciprocal has become more and more one-sided. What was once seen as an inherent part of life is now only viewed as a money-making machine. The tree that once bore pure fruit is being injected with fertiliser and chemicals for artificial produce that stays outwardly fresh for longer. The quality of such food is questionable at best and has been associated with multiple diseases. The tree which once gave cool relief is being chopped off for industrial space to create factories, and homes and tourism spots for those who can afford it. Rivers which once gave fish are now filled with waste, causing damage to aquatic flora and fauna.

While these are seemingly direct interactions with nature, there is another, more indirect impact that human technology has had on nature. We have left carbon footprints through convenience appliances like

air conditioners, refrigerators, cars and washing machines. Plastic and chemicals are hiding in everyday products, like face wash and toothpaste, which ultimately make their way to the stomachs of innocent sea creatures. In our quest for a fast-paced life, we have unknowingly and knowingly caused great anguish to the environment in which we live.

We humans are a species considered to be much above others in terms of

had to take a step back for nature to bloom again—for dolphins to come back to our beaches, for birds to start chirping again, for pollution levels to drop and for the ozone layer to heal. The damage to nature is so immense that for years, nature tried to warn us with cyclones, floods, drought, earthquakes and other natural disasters. When humankind still did not pay heed, it had to push us away from itself to recoup. Covid-19 is nothing



PHOTO: COLLECTED

intellect. However, we may have proved ourselves unworthy of such a stature. Individually, institutionally, nationally and internationally, we have all played our collective parts in the ruin of nature and consequently, ourselves.

Scientists and environmentalists are trying to tell us how badly we are damaging the environment. The world had to lock down and all of humankind

but nature's unbridled fury, unleashed on us for the years and years of damage we inflicted upon it.

An example of the survival spirit of nature when humans are not there to disrupt its progress is the *Sagorlota*, or the Beach Morning Glory, a key component of the beach ecology which had disappeared from parts of Cox's Bazar due to the unbridled movement of tourists and the

construction of structures along the beach. It is sad however, that it took something like Covid-19, for this innocent green plant to make a comeback.

On an individual basis, everything from a tissue to a brick should remind us of the heavy environmental cost that must have gone into the production of the good in question—the trees that had to be cut for the tissue and the smoke that was released into the air from the brick kiln. We—not our community and not our government, but we on an individual level—can make environmentally friendly choices, like using leftover soil from river dredging, *golpata* and other biodegradable material for building, and jute over polythene bags for shopping.

Only a few dollars can bring an environment friendly atmosphere to a family by providing a smoke free oven, alternate fuel, a solar powered light, surface water for irrigation, rainwater harvesting, a bicycle, a paddle boat and simple techniques to preserve foods, fruits and vegetables and organic fertilisers for a healthy life, both in city and rural areas. The effort may require some sort of a subsidy in the initial phases, but is definitely less costly than the price we would pay for harmful environmental practices.

In the end, it is all about perspective. A shift in perspective got us here, and another shift can take us back. It is up to us to bring back the time we used to nurture nature and love it for itself. If we can express gratitude for the bounties of nature, the ecological balance and biodiversity, we can make this world a better place. If we educate our children about the environment, not just with books but with practice, they can light a beacon of hope for the generations to come and save the environment.

Kazi Amdadul Hoque is an environmental and social activist, and Director-Strategic Planning and Head of Climate Action in Friendship. Email: hoqueka@gmail.com.