

Child marriage has spiked during the pandemic

Monitoring and enforcement of law must be more vigorous

ACCORDING to a telesurvey report conducted by Manusher Jonno Foundation (MJF), child marriage has sharply increased. MJF found 462 girls being married off in June, and 170 girls getting married in May. With families becoming poorer due to job losses and schools being closed, push factors have driven up the number of child marriages and this will likely continue if no interventions are made.

Poverty is a major driver of child marriage, but other factors include the illegal but widespread practice of giving dowry (where the younger the bride, the less will be the burden of dowry on the girl's family), and the general failure of the state to provide security to girls and women. Despite education being free till secondary school, girls are forced into marriage due to these factors. Growing awareness of the ills of child marriage have inspired organisations, public officials and law enforcers to stop child marriages, but these efforts have been too few and far between to make a major impact.

According to Unicef, Bangladesh has the fourth highest rate of child marriage in the world. This is hardly in line with our Sustainable Development Goals, which includes eliminating child, early and forced marriage by 2030. We are a signatory of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child and have our own Child Marriage Restraint Act that stipulates 18 years to be the minimum age of marriage for a girl. But the introduction of a special provision in the law that allows child marriage in "special circumstances" has created a legal loophole that allows parents and guardians to marry off their daughters long before they reach 18.

There is little doubt that child marriage is detrimental to society in every way. Children are robbed of their childhood, subjected to sexual violence, undergo risky pregnancies and deliveries and may even die during childbirth. They also have underweight babies who may either die early or be stunted for life.

On paper, Bangladesh is in total agreement that child marriage is an evil that needs to be eliminated. But in practice, the government and society in general has not done enough to remove this malaise, which is likely to get worse in the coming months. The government must therefore jumpstart its national plan of action to end child marriage, with special monitoring mechanisms during this pandemic. This means building greater awareness through media campaigns and enforcement of anti dowry and anti child marriage laws. The special provision that allows for child marriage must be removed. Religious leaders must be brought on board to help in this fight against child marriage. Public officials and law enforcers must all be part of this endeavour so that all members of society recognise child marriage as an evil to be removed permanently in the best interests of our nation.

High positive cases despite low testing is bad news

Extensive testing and enforcement of health guidelines are crucial

A recent report in this daily shows that the coronavirus positivity rate in the country has soared in the last few days, despite a decline in the number of tests during this period. Frighteningly, the rate was 24.11 percent—the highest single-day positivity rate since the first case was detected on March 8, while the total number of infections in the country stood at 1,83,795 during the time of the report. The data gathered suggest that the transmission of the virus is declining in the urban zones but is on the rise in rural areas. These facts and figures hardly give us the true picture of the spread of the virus.

As we have repeated ad nauseum, without widespread testing, we will never be able to gauge the trend of the virus. It is deeply concerning that the number of Covid-19 tests has dropped significantly in recent weeks after the government imposed fees—Tk 200 (if samples are given to dedicated sample collection booths or public hospitals) and Tk 500 (if samples are collected from home)—on the tests from the beginning of this month. It is obvious that such a decision will surely be discouraging for the general public, especially the poor. At a time when it is crucial to conduct mass testing in every possible community, putting a price tag on it hardly seems wise. This means fewer people will get tested although the trend shows that more and more people are infected, resulting in infected individuals unknowingly spreading it to others. Unless people are tested and contact tracing is done with isolation and treatment for those who test positive, how the pandemic will be contained remains a mystery.

As we struggle with the worst public health crisis in the history of our nation, the government ought to boost up vigorous testing immediately—for free. It is important, moreover, that test reports are provided quickly so that appropriate actions can be taken. The government should identify hotspots, monitor the cases, systematically implement contact tracing and keep an accurate record of positive cases. Mass testing should continue uninterrupted. Better knowledge of the ground realities can guide us to take the most effective measures in tackling Covid-19.



C R ABRAR

will surely return home."

This was the ardent appeal of Sharifah Shakirah, who fled to Malaysia from Buthidaung township in Myanmar at the age of six. Sharifah was joined by four other Rohingya youth at an eSymposium on June 9 to share their experiences of the Covid-19 situation in their respective countries of asylum.

The Covid-19 pandemic has wreaked havoc on the lives and livelihoods of people all over the world. It has disproportionately harmed the marginalised—refugees, asylum seekers and the stateless people. The Rohingya survivors of Myanmar's genocide are no exception.

Rohingyas living in Burma are being subjected to state sponsored stigmatisation after the outbreak of Covid-19. Although so far one Rohingya and two Rakhines have been infected, the local authorities and the media are engaged in a hate campaign against the Rohingya, claiming "Bengalis", the slur word for Rohingya, have entered Myanmar illegally and have brought coronavirus with them. This has resulted in a sharp increase in hate speech against the Rohingya on Burmese social media.

The conditions of the Rohingyas in the internally displaced persons (IDP) camps in Burma are particularly dire. With a plethora of discriminatory restrictions, famine like conditions prevail in northern Rakhine. In violation of the explicit order of the International Court of Justice to protect the Rohingya, the Burmese government continues to pursue its genocidal policies against them, causing internal displacement of thousands. Many more are forced to flee to Bangladesh and the other countries of south-east Asia.

There are more than one million Rohingyas in Bangladesh, 300,000 in Saudi Arabia, 150,000 in Malaysia, 30,000 in India and tens of thousands more scattered across the world. The refugee camps have very rudimentary facilities and are almost never well resourced. The lockdown has increased the suffering of the residents as problems of water supply, shelter repair and food supply appear, and health care services dwindle. Most Rohingyas in informal camps and shanties in urban settings live in crowded conditions, with poor water and sanitation facilities. All these make them particularly vulnerable to Covid-19.

A large number of Rohingyas have to fend for themselves and work as wage labourers in the informal sector. The lockdowns and the overall economic slowdown have robbed them of livelihood opportunities and pushed them into an abyss of malnutrition and hunger. The absence of any social protection mechanism has further exposed them to coronavirus infection and other diseases.

Hundreds of Rohingyas are passing a dreadful time in detention camps, many for years. Bereft of any contact with their loved ones, most cannot secure legal support. Scores of cases exist in which Rohingyas who served out their sentences still remain incarcerated, as authorities deny their release since Burma is not



HABIBULLAH KARIM

IN the last four months, the country has been swept up in the shadowy spectre of the coronavirus, snuffing the life out of our near and dear ones before their time. Lockdowns, sanitisers, face masks and social distancing have dominated public discourses of late.

In all this gloom and despair, the news of university students and recent graduates from Bangladesh winning two of the top six awards at the recently concluded International Blockchain Olympiad held in Hong Kong is truly a breath of fresh air.

Blockchain is a very new technology that gained traction globally after Bitcoin—the very first cryptocurrency in the world based on the freshly-minted blockchain technology paradigm—debuted in 2009. Today, there are hundreds of use-cases of blockchain implementation, not just in crypto or digital currencies, but in everything from supply chain provenances, self-sovereign identities, user-centric medical records and

willing to take them back. Curtailment of physical movement even within the refugee communities, mistreatment, threats of reduction of food or forcible relocation to uninhabited natural disaster prone sites, and sustained policies of internet ban in some states, have been of major concern to the members of the Rohingya community.

Refugees and asylum-seeking Rohingyas are being subjected to various forms of exploitation. Those who can still find work may have to work longer hours with reduced wages, and face degrading treatment. The condition of women and children is distressing. The presence of men at home for most of the day, compounded with additional stresses and strains, makes women vulnerable to domestic violence. The prolonged closure of counselling and legal aid clinics due to Covid-19 has further limited their ability to seek support.

Hate crimes against the Rohingyas in different countries have been widely reported. Often such stigmatisation, hate crime and xenophobia are state condoned and echo the genocidal ideology of Myanmar, the principal perpetrator of



"What these youth want is to thrive as human beings, to realise their innate potentials, not merely to survive."

PHOTO: ANISUR RAHMAN

genocide.

All these conditions are propitious for human traffickers. Anecdotal evidence indicates that, taking advantage of the worsening condition of the Rohingyas in Covid-19 situation, trafficking and human smuggling syndicates have bolstered their operations to aggressively recruit Rohingyas in distress, both in Arakan and in countries of asylum. Currently, the region is experiencing the plight of the Rohingyas drifting on traffickers' boats with little food, drinking water or energy supplies in the Andaman Sea and the South China Sea. Torture, rape and degrading treatment are rife in the boats. These are stark examples of the Rohingyas' predicament, who have been subjected to both border closures by states and extortion by the traffickers. One panelist noted "in Myanmar, Rohingyas have no future and lead a sub-human life. They are forced to take help of traffickers to escape the atrocious conditions at home". Another made a fervent plea for the world

to understand that "being refugees is not our choice; circumstances compel us to move to other lands".

The panelists regretted that most states and international actors continue to ponder to the genocidal Burmese state and refuse to acknowledge Rohingyas "as Rohingyas", refrain from calling mass atrocities and crimes against the Rohingya "as genocide" and decline to term people fleeing genocide by crossing borders "as refugees". Needless to say, these acts of omission are nothing less than condoning genocide.

The Rohingya community is disappointed that they are left out of the decision making processes that involve their life and their future. Projects for refugees are designed by national and international bureaucrats, without any input of the community, nor is there any independent assessment about their efficacy. The publicly funded "big organisations do not consult us. They sign secret agreements without our knowledge and they make covert plans about our future with the country that committed genocide against us", noted the Coordinator of Free Rohingya Coalition (FRC).

communities after their eventual return home, then all Rohingya children and youth ought to be given the opportunity to develop their human potentials by arranging their access to appropriate education and skill development. There is an urgent need by all quarters (host states, donor agencies, intergovernmental actors and NGOs) to recognise the community's agency and create opportunities for self-empowerment and entrepreneurship. This will reduce the pressure on the host countries and international actors, as well as prepare the community members for their eventual reintegration in Arakan after their return to Myanmar.

The Rohingya members acknowledged the adverse impact of the refugee flow on the host communities and economic and environmental costs that countries like Bangladesh have to bear. They felt Burma should be made to pay appropriate reparation to the countries that are adversely affected by its actions, contributing to the refugee flow and incurring huge costs: social, economic and environmental.

Highlighting the ignominy that refugees and asylum seekers often have

to endure, one panelist reminded the audience that they too once had homes, went to school and owned property. She said "we are not objects of charity, what we need is support. Please understand we are human beings and like you, we have dreams and aspirations". The message was loud and clear. What these youth want is to thrive as human beings, to realise their innate potentials, not merely to survive.

Almost at the end of the conversation, a panelist posed a question to the audience—"what would you do if your own country denied you your rightful claim to citizenship and documentation and forcibly expelled you from your ancestral land?"

Perhaps the time has come for us to place ourselves in Rohingyas' shoes and view the world from their perspective.

C R Abrar is an academic. He is the Coordinator of Refugee and Migratory Movements Research Unit (RMMRU). Abrar acknowledges the insights gained from Sharifah Shakirah, Hafsa Tameesuddin, Nay San Lwin, Ali Johar and Sujuddin Karimuddin at the RMMRU-FRC eSymposium on Covid 19 and Rohingyas held on 9 June.

INTERNATIONAL BLOCKCHAIN OLYMPIAD 2020

The youth of Bangladesh shine on the world stage

even Covid-19 contact and tracing. For those interested in blockchain, a primer on this new technology can be found in an earlier column printed in this daily under the title "Blockchain: Ticket to universality of truths?"

It is absolutely astounding that Bangladesh could join this select group of countries that competed on the international stage to showcase real-world applications of blockchain and bring home two of the top awards on its maiden attempt. To be specific, the International

organising the event to promoting it and conducting the competition to even holding the award ceremony—everything was done online leveraging all the platforms at the disposal of society today. Emails, Facebook Messenger, Google Meet, Online Portal, WhatsApp, Zoom—the whole alphabet soup of modern tools and apps were put to effective use in planning, mobilising and conducting all aspects of the Blockchain Olympiad Bangladesh fully online, with participation from more than 450

in overcoming the restrictions imposed by the Covid-19 pandemic.

The 12 teams that were finally nominated by the Blockchain Olympiad Bangladesh organising committee to compete in the International Blockchain Olympiad held on July 3 to July 5 in Hong Kong, were intensively mentored and coached by nearly 30 top government, business and academic professionals over a period of one month. This helped the contestants improve and fine-tune their projects to the point where all 12 of them were awarded the certificate of merit—the only country to have been thus recognised.

The outstanding success of the young blockchain enthusiasts with some nudging from the professional elders proved once again that given the opportunity and right kind of guidance, our youth can compete with the best in the world and hold their own.

Now we need to nurture such world-winning projects for professional deployment in our own soil, so that these very talented young minds don't have to seek opportunities elsewhere for realising their potentials and dreams.

Habibullah Karim is the founder of Technohaven Co Ltd, a co-founder of BASIS and the coordinator of Blockchain Olympiad Bangladesh.

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Blockchain Olympiad itself is only three years old, which is organised by the City University of Hong Kong in partnership with the Hong Kong Blockchain Society.

Though new to this field, Bangladesh marked a historic milestone when it held its first national blockchain Olympiad in April this year, bypassing the pandemic lockdowns by going fully online. From

students and recent graduates from all parts of the country and the involvement of more than 60 organisers, jurors and mentors from diverse professions in government, academia and the industry. The Blockchain Olympiad Bangladesh has certainly been a trendsetter in fully-online operations that has already encouraged many other entities to adopt this method