

Victims of human trafficking thrown in jail

If the government won't protect our citizens, who will?

A report published on Wednesday shows just how vulnerable Bangladeshi migrant workers are to becoming victims of human trafficking, and sadly, how totally devoid of support they are from their own government, even after becoming victims of criminal activities. Out of 107 migrants who were deported from Vietnam on August 18, 81—instead of being reunited with their families at the end of their 14-day quarantine—have been incarcerated instead. They were arrested under the dubious Section 54 of the Code of Criminal Procedure, which allows the state to detain those suspected of “tarnishing the country’s image abroad.”

Some of these returnee migrants spoke about how Bangladeshi and Vietnamese manpower brokers, in connivance with Bangladeshi recruiting and travel agents, arranged fake job documents and sent them to Vietnam over the past year. However, once they reached the country, their passports were taken away, and they were beaten up when they refused to stay and work. The “crime” they were accused of in Vietnam involved holding demonstrations in front of the Bangladesh embassy demanding justice and repatriation.

After suffering such hardships, one would expect these workers to receive assistance from the Bangladeshi authorities, especially after being sent home. Instead, the arresting SI argued that these trafficking victims are likely to engage in various crimes including robbery, family violence, killing and militancy, if they are released. On what grounds can this claim be made, especially when there is no clear proof of these workers being prosecuted for violating any laws in Vietnam?

What is even worse is the inclination of the authorities to persecute the victims while ignoring the real culprits. About a dozen migrants told The Daily Star’s correspondent that they had immigration clearance from the Bureau of Manpower Employment and Training (BMET) for jobs in Vietnam. The Bangladesh Ambassador to Vietnam also said she wrote several times to the home and expatriates’ welfare ministries on such human trafficking, but received no assistance. The BMET never communicated with the embassy for verification of any companies in Vietnam before issuing immigration clearances. Yet, so far, the only action taken against the BMET has been the formation of a probe committee at the expatriates’ welfare ministry. The recruiting agents responsible for the plight of these workers have not only escaped prosecution; they have also been excused from bearing the cost of repatriation of and compensation to the affected migrant workers.

It is reprehensible that these migrants, after facing such injustices abroad, are being unjustly held and harassed once again at home. We urge the authorities to release these victims of human trafficking and to immediately conduct a judicial investigation into the recruiting agencies and BMET officials who allowed their trafficking to occur in the first place. If this situation is not handled judiciously, our unfair treatment of victims of human trafficking will tarnish the country’s image far more than any acts committed by our workers abroad.

Private healthcare facilities must have price charts for medical tests and services

They must comply with the HC order

WE commend the High Court for ordering private hospitals, clinics and diagnostic centres to submit revised charts of fees for medical tests to the court. During the hearing of a writ petition, the court also ordered the authorities concerned to inform it of the progress made in formulating guidelines to monitor these private healthcare facilities under the Medical Practice and Private Clinics and Laboratories (Regulation) Ordinance-1982.

Last year, following the same writ petition, the HC had directed the private healthcare facilities to display the chart of their fees in public view. It had then asked the health secretary, director general of the Directorate General of Health Services (DGHS) and Bangladesh Medical and Dental Council to execute the directives. Although the authorities concerned were supposed to form a committee to execute the directives within 60 days of getting the order, we still do not know how much progress has been made in this regard.

There have been widespread allegations against the private healthcare facilities of the country of charging exorbitant fees for various medical tests. The irregularities of the hospitals in providing treatment to patients—both Covid and non-Covid—have been vividly exposed during this coronavirus pandemic. While many patients were denied treatment by the hospitals, those which provided treatment charged exorbitant fees for their services. It was reported in The Daily Star last July how Covid-19 patients were handed ghostly bills for getting oxygen support—one patient, for example, was charged Tk 86,400 for less than one hour of oxygen support in a city hospital! Besides, as the media reported, patients also had to pay higher charges for other essential services in the hospitals during this time.

Therefore, it is absolutely necessary that private clinics, hospitals and diagnostic centres have fixed rates for all medical tests and services and have a chart of their fees displayed in public view. This will not only be helpful for the patients but also will prevent the hospital staff from resorting to any corrupt practices. The High Court’s order in this regard is very timely and should be complied with by all private healthcare facilities.

INTERNATIONAL CEDAW DAY

The long and winding road to end discrimination against women



TASMIYAH T. RAHMAN

reservations about certain articles that uphold a state’s responsibility towards women and their right to social and economic advantages, and address discrimination in matrimonial and family laws.

It’s about time the government adopted these articles as these are fundamental to ensuring equal rights for women and girls who are subject to various forms of discrimination and violence. Ratification of these articles would commit government ownership as a first step. Then further advocacy would be required to ensure enforcement practices the impact of which would trickle down in our society, where women and girls continue to face practical challenges when it comes to living a life with dignity.

A few examples will shed light on the nature of problems and biases facing women and girls in their everyday life.

Thousands of women went through this kind of violence at home during the lockdown, but lacked the courage to speak up against it. Even though there are laws giving them protection on paper, many women like Rohima opt not to complain.

Violence on the rise
Rohima (not her real name) received a call from her employer informing her that she doesn’t need to come to work because of the pandemic. She is a domestic worker living in a slum. Her husband is a rickshaw puller and found himself out of work after the city went under lockdown in late March. When she was approached by an NGO with cash support to help her in these trying times, her complaint

is a woman. Henna has accepted her fate even though she puts in the same effort as the men in her profession. When her employer was approached, he said that women are often less “productive”. They also miss work when their children and older people in their family are unwell. For men, this is not an issue; thus he thinks it is justified that Henna gets less wage. This is the practice, he said.

While about 84 percent of people work



SOURCE: WWW.BLONCAMPUS.COM

was that her husband beats her every day, because he is “stressed” owing to his being out of work. When advised to call a help line that can support her, she expressed her fear that he would beat her even more if he knew that she had complained.

Thousands of women went through this kind of violence at home during the lockdown, but lacked the courage to speak up against it. Even though there are laws giving them protection on paper, many women like Rohima opt not to complain as our still largely patriarchal society “allows” this behaviour. Violence against women saw a 69 percent increase between 2019 and the Covid-19 crisis in 2020, according to findings by BRAC’s Human Rights and Legal Aid Services.

Reduced wages for women
Henna is a construction worker and often works 10-12 hours a day to make ends meet. However, her daily wage is almost half her male counterpart’s. When asked, she says that she earns less because she

in the informal economy in Bangladesh, the wage gap is more prominent in this sector as wage is unregulated. Even though women produce the same amount of work, with the same hours spent, they end up being paid less, without any additional benefits either.

Do women have the right to rent, let alone have equal share of property?
Onnonna, a young filmmaker, lives in Dhaka city with two other flatmates. The apartment’s guard is her biggest guardian! He seems always curious about what Ononna wears and when she comes home. The other day, he refused to open the gate as she returned home at midnight from a shooting assignment. The guard’s enabler is the landlord himself, who doesn’t like Ononna’s lifestyle and often asks her why she is still single. She is fed up and now looking for another place to rent.

Article 2c of CEDAW (which Bangladesh has yet to ratify) clearly highlights the need to “establish legal

Are we aware of the severity of vitamin D deficiency in Bangladesh?

NAWSHAD AHMED

IF half of the population of Bangladesh and up to 70 percent of children are deficient in vitamin D, then it must be a major cause for concern for us. Despite having the natural advantage of abundant sunshine all year round allowing vitamin D synthesis, why are we having this phenomenon in our population?

The high prevalence of vitamin D deficiency in Bangladesh can be explained by people’s limited exposure to sunlight especially in the urban areas, use of traditional clothing, limited outdoor activity by women and children, and low consumption of vitamin D-rich food including sea fish.

In fact, vitamin D deficiency is not a problem only in Bangladesh; it is a neglected public health issue globally. Almost one billion people in the world suffer from this deficiency. It is prevalent in both the western countries and the tropical countries with abundant sunshine. In South Asia, about 80 percent of the apparently healthy population is deficient in vitamin D ((20 ng/mL) and up to 40 percent of the population is severely deficient ((10 ng/mL).

Vitamin D has been given high importance for its role in calcium homeostasis and bone health since its identification in 1921. Since then, medical practitioners know that vitamin D deficiency leads to bone diseases like rickets and osteomalacia (softening of bones), and other illnesses such as diabetes, different types of cancer, autoimmune diseases, backache, myalgia, muscle weakness, rheumatoid arthritis, gout, chronic ulcers, cardiovascular diseases, hypertension, dental problem, pre-eclampsia and psychological disorders like depression.

I have developed an interest in this regard after my own suffering caused by vitamin D deficiency. I am sharing my personal experience below with the hope that it will help raise awareness of the severity of the problem.

In the early morning of April 10, 2020, I was unable to get out of bed due to severe back pain. I had no previous experience of such pain and so got very nervous. I thought I should not visit any doctor given the Covid-19 situation. So I spoke with two friends who I knew had

suffered back pain in recent months. All that they suggested was that I take complete bed rest for a week and I should be fine.

However, after a couple of days, since I could not tolerate the pain, I consulted a doctor over phone. He suggested some medicines which I took for a week. This did not help. I consulted another doctor the following week, and started taking medicine as prescribed, for another two weeks. However, the pain continued and in fact increased more. I could not sleep the whole night due to extreme pain. I was still not prepared to see any doctor due to the worsening Covid-19 situation in the country.

Two months passed by without any improvement in my physical condition. I finally decided to visit a doctor. When I met him, the doctor asked me to do a number of tests. On the basis of the test reports, he prescribed me medicines and advised me to see a physiotherapist.



Limited exposure to sun rays is immensely beneficial to health.

PHOTO: COLLECTED

Accordingly, I went to a physiotherapist who I have known for several years, a young man in his mid-thirties. He carefully went through all my medical reports, looked at the X-ray and MRI plates, and came to the conclusion that I was severely vitamin D deficient, and the

only thing I needed to do is either take vitamin D tablets or sit under the sun for 15-20 minutes every day for the next six months.

The next day, I pulled a chair and sat down near the window from where sunlight was pouring in. I felt much better after sitting for only 15 minutes. The next day, I sat again for 15 minutes. And, I could not believe myself as I was soon completely free from pain. Along with the back pain, my knee pain and muscle pain—which I had been suffering from for the last ten years—were also totally gone. I realised the value of vitamin D; I never thought it would work so fast.

I believe we should undergo lifestyle modification in order to reduce vitamin D deficiency. We should expose ourselves to sunshine at least two to three times a week to naturally minimise vitamin D deficiency. Among various micronutrients, vitamin D is an important one for our body which we can easily get from

protection of the rights of women on an equal basis with men and to ensure through competent national tribunals and other public institutions the effective protection of women against any act of discrimination.” Unless these basic principles are upheld by the country’s law, women will continue to be the subject of such discrimination and harassment.

Dilara’s story is also a telling example of such discrimination. Dilara was attacked on her Facebook page when she mentioned that India’s Supreme Court gave equal inheritance rights to both son and daughter. Immediately, religious references were brought up. She had to answer to about a hundred messages justifying her stand. Many, mostly men, were unhappy that this issue was even being discussed, as the law in this regard is governed by religion, and thus justified. In reality, Dilara has been deprived of her rightful share of her father’s property and was fighting her own brothers in court.

Marriage, divorce and protection after divorce

Beauty was married for 14 years and decided to leave her husband as he was abusive. Often he would hit her and their children. So she decided to leave him and claimed alimony to support their children. It has been three years since, and she is yet to get any support from her husband. She is unable to go to court as even in her own house her family thinks she is a burden and they would want her to go back to her husband. Her family is also open to her remarrying but she is stalling the process, as her ex-husband has threatened to take her children away from her. According to the law, the legal guardian of Beauty’s children is their father and he can take them away if she marries again.

Our family laws are still rooted in patriarchy, and often guarded in the name of “religious sentiment”. It must be acknowledged that Bangladesh has achieved notable progress in women’s empowerment as a collective, but the struggles of individual women—especially the discrimination they continue to face in daily life—remain largely unaddressed. Bold steps are needed to counter these deep-seated problems and to establish women’s rights. The government must take this fight forward and ratify the CEDAW in its entirety.

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abnormalities, growth retardation and stunting. Vitamin D deficiency in adults leads to osteomalacia, osteopenia, osteoporosis and subsequent risks of fractures.

According to the World Health Organization, getting anywhere from 5 to 15 minutes of sunlight on the arms, hands, and face 2-3 times a week is enough to get the required vitamin D for ourselves. To be effective, the sunrays must penetrate the skin. Wearing sunscreen or heavy clothing will not result in vitamin D production. However, we have to remember that overexposure to sunrays might cause harm to our health. Skin cancer is associated with too much exposure to sunrays. There have been numerous studies linking cancer to sunrays but it is well-established by now that limited exposure is not a risk; rather it is immensely beneficial to health.

Due to the current lockdown-like situation imposed by Covid-19, many people are still spending most of their time indoors. Others are spending long hours in offices and their respective workplaces. It is important that they regularly expose themselves to sunshine, if possible during the week days, or at least during the weekends.

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