

Why are former Tazreen workers still on the streets?

And why do we care so little?

Our female expatriate workers continue to die

Who will answer for their deaths?

THE statistics are astounding. It should have made the relevant agencies sit up and act. However, it seems that they are totally inured to such tragic incidents. It is not one or two or even 10, but nearly a hundred women expatriate workers, on average every year, that have died in the Middle East. To be exact, 473 women returned home dead from Middle East in around 5 years of which 175 died in Saudi Arabia. Of those, 51 committed suicide. Regrettably, 81 female migrant workers died by suicide in the last four years in different countries. And, between January and September of this year, bodies of at least 63 female workers were sent back home. Of them, 22 lost their lives in Saudi Arabia alone. In the recent instance, an underage girl named Nadi returned home, in a casket, having been sent as a domestic worker to Saudi Arabia, only this year. Apparently her documents showed that she was born in 1993 whereas, the record shows her year of birth as 2007. We want to ask whether the expatriate ministry has undertaken any study at all in the last five years to find out why and how so many women workers have died in Middle Eastern countries. The numbers are too many to be accepted as accidents or natural deaths. Has the administration ever felt any compulsion to inquire into why so many of them had chosen to end their own lives? Did the administration not feel the need to carry out its own post-mortem, of at least those alleged to have committed suicide, after their bodies were returned home? There are quite a few who, we feel, are responsible for the death of the unfortunate girl. First, while we admit that an overseas job may be too tempting to turn down for a low income family, should Nadi's family have allowed her to take employment abroad knowing that she was underage? Those who have issued the passport and verified her particulars are no less responsible for Nadi's death, and of course her employer, who cannot avoid responsibility. We have editorialised many times on this very grim and sensitive issue, and suggested repeatedly to formulate a new policy on sending women workers abroad and to exercise caution while selecting the candidates and the types of jobs that they are to be employed in. We had also suggested that till such time the situation improves, and we are able to ensure safety and physical security of the women migrant workers, their employment abroad should be embargoed. The ministry must immediately launch an inquiry into the deaths and determine the causative factors. If need be, the host countries should be asked to help in such inquiries to determine the facts. Neither our workers' labour nor do their lives come cheap. And it is for the government to uphold that.

Journalists must be protected from harm's way

Govt must do more to affirm its commitment to press freedom

KILLED, maimed, jailed, sued, bullied and harassed in various other ways, journalists are under growing pressure across the world. With the addition of "virtual violence", the threats facing the fourth estate are profound and many. Often, especially in war-torn countries as well as countries run by dictators and pseudo-democratic governments, it is the state that is undermining, delegitimising and even endangering their work through calculated policies, exacerbating the risks they face. We get a gist of the situation from the Death Watch list released by the International Press Institute (IPI) on the eve of the International Day to End Impunity for Crimes against Journalists on November 2. According to the list, at least 52 journalists, including one in Bangladesh, lost their lives due to their work since October 2019, of which 24 were murdered in targeted attacks. "The unbroken cycle of impunity for crimes against journalists fuels further violence against the press," said a statement by the IPI.

In Bangladesh, we remain concerned about the insufficient response by the authorities to various crimes being committed against journalists as well as the repressive policies adopted by the government itself, including the Digital Security Act, undermining press freedom. The pandemic has brought new challenges for the journalists. According to a report by the Reporters Without Borders published earlier last month, at least 16 journalists have been victims of "serious violence" in Bangladesh since the start of the year. This is in addition to the numerous instances of attacks, intimidation, harassment, arrests and lawsuits against journalists recorded by other organisations. The alarmingly insufficient response from the government has emboldened the perpetrators as well as suppressed the freedom of media organisations. The cumulative effect of this situation is that journalists don't feel safe anymore—and media organisations are under pressure to toe the official line for their own survival.

This is not what a democracy looks like—of which an independent and ethical press is a vital component. Journalism is a public good and the government must respect and protect it in the greater interest of the public. We urge the government to undertake appropriate measures to address the physical and psychological safety concerns of journalists and create an enabling environment for the free flow of information and opinion. Freedom of speech and freedom of the press are closely intertwined. We cannot achieve one without achieving the other. So the government must ensure that both thrive in equal measure, especially at a time when both are essential to curb the pandemic and its far-reaching and multidimensional effects.

THE SOUND & THE FURY



SUSHMITA S. PREETHA

FOR the last 45 days, at least 40 (former) workers of Tazreen Fashions Limited have been staging a protest on the sidewalks outside the Press Club, unnoticed, for the most part, by the media. Each night, they make beds out of flimsy blankets and hang mosquito nets on the club's fence for yet another troubled night's sleep. Each morning, they beg the Press Club authorities to allow them to use the restroom facilities, although most are turned away and forced to find repulsive alternatives (as a result, most do not drink more than a glass of water throughout the day). They eat maybe one full meal and tit bits throughout the day brought by well-wishers and a handful of leftist activists who try their best to boost the protestors' morale. When it rains, as it did two nights ago, they have no choice but to let it wash over them and wait for the chilly air to dry their clothes. Almost all are in considerable physical pain, which has only aggravated over the past month from having to sit on the hard grout for such long stretches of time. But they are adamant they won't leave the streets until their demands of dignified compensation, rehabilitation and justice are met.

Most were permanently disabled when they jumped from the upper floors of Tazreen Fashions Ltd to escape the fire that killed over 117 workers eight years ago on November 24. There were no fire exists in the factory, the staircases and exits were obstructed in most of the floors and the main door was locked from outside, while the nine-storey building only had permission for constructing three floors. Although they were spared their lives, the injured workers have been living an unbelievable nightmare ever since, unable to find work or retain their jobs for long. They were breadwinners of their families prior to the fire, but have had to live off of people's charities and loans for the last eight years. With Covid-19, the charities and loans have dried up, and even the shops won't sell food on credit anymore.

"If I knew of the debt and hardship that awaited me—that I would be reduced to a beggar outside the Press Club—I wouldn't have tried to save myself by jumping off the third floor," says Jorina Begum, stretched uncomfortably on the footpath, her feet swollen from sitting on the ground for over a month. Three rods had pierced her bones and flesh during the fall and her spine was permanently damaged. Multiple surgeries, countless visits to the physiotherapist and a lifetime's worth of painkillers later, Jorina still cannot sit still, or stand on her feet, for too long. The pain in her spine is relentless. Her husband packed up and left years ago, and since then, it has been her elderly

mother who has supported her and her two children—eight and 10, respectively—with her meagre income as a domestic worker. But with Covid, her mother's income took a dip as well and now they are being threatened with eviction since they have not been able to pay rent for the last three months.

"Whatever we received as alms four years ago was spent almost immediately paying off the loans from the first four years—loans which I took for the surgeries, medicines and to simply feed my children. I still owe at least five lakh taka and no one will lend me any money anymore. And honestly, how am I to pay back the loans anyway? My mother is becoming older and sicker, and I should be the one supporting her, but after feeding us, she doesn't even have any money left to go see a doctor. I was an active member of the workforce. I don't want to be a beggar forever. I want rehabilitation."



For 45 days, workers of Tazreen Fashions Limited have been protesting outside the Press Club demanding dignified compensation, rehabilitation and justice.

PHOTO: SHAHIDUL ISLAM SABUJ

Labour activists have long argued that permanently disabled workers should be given compensation equal to at least their lifetime's earnings, taking into consideration the bonuses and increments they would have earned till their retirement. Under our labour laws, however, a deceased worker's life is still worth Tk 1 lakh and that of a permanently disabled worker is Tk 1.25 lakh. Eight years since Tazreen, there have been no attempts by the government to amend the provisions for compensation, which remains one of the lowest in the world. In fact, subsequent demands by labour activists and workers to amend the law have been dismissed as untenable for the industry. Yet, our main competitor in the garments sector, China, is able to offer compensation to workers worth about Tk 78 lakhs, according to China Labour Bulletin. One of the key demands of the

protestors is amendment to compensation laws and provision of "dignified" compensation to permanently disabled workers. As Aleya Begum, another former Tazreen worker, says, "We want what is our right. It is not our fault that we lost our ability to work. We were robbed of this ability. Both my husband and I were injured in the fire, and now neither of us can work. If we were both working, we would be in senior positions, earning about Tk 30,000 per month with overtime and benefits. Even if we earned only Tk 10,000 each, we would earn Tk 2,40,000 each year. If the government wants to hand out Tk 1.25 lakh and call it a day, for how long will it help us?"

Workers protesting outside the Press Club say they were not even offered this meagre amount by the government. About 12 permanently disabled workers were given Tk 50,000 from the Prime Minister's Welfare Fund. They did, however, receive

only paid negligible amounts. Grievously injured and permanently disabled workers say they received between Tk 1.5-5 lakh each, even though victims were promised the minimum standard of compensation specified in the ILO Convention 121. As Jorina and Aleya *apa* point out, this lump sum helped them at the time to pay back some of their loans, but how could it possibly help them lead a dignified life with their dependants?

Workers are also angry that while they rot on the streets, Delwar Hossain, the owner of Tazreen, is free on bail, with no progress over the last eight years on the case filed against him and 12 others for murder under Section 302 of the Penal Code, culpable homicide not amounting to murder under Section 304, causing death by negligence under Section 304A, and voluntarily causing hurt under Section 323. The culpability of the owners and management of Tazreen have been well documented over the years by researchers, activists and journalists—even a Home Ministry investigation following the fire declared that the negligence of the owners was to blame for the huge death toll at Tazreen. Yet, over the last five years, the prosecution has moved at a snail's pace, failing to even produce witnesses before the court—so far only eight out of 104 witnesses have been deposed. According to court sources and activists closely following the trial, of the 38 hearings scheduled so far, the prosecution was able to produce witnesses on only six occasions! It ought to be a matter of national shame that the prosecution has failed so miserably to discharge their duties in such a high-profile case as Tazreen, where the evidence overwhelmingly supports that the factory was built violating multiple safety codes and that workers were not allowed to leave the burning building despite fire alarms going off as soon as the fire broke out. With a prosecution like this, who even needs defence lawyers?

The protestors are adamant that they don't need any more alms—they want a dignified life, rehabilitation and justice for the crimes committed against them. But no one seems to care about their demands—not the government, not the Bangladesh Garment Manufacturers and Exporters Association, not the buyers, not the media and not even us. About 10 days ago, representatives from the Department of Inspection for Factories and Establishments (DIFE) came and made a list of the aggrieved workers but then left without making any assurances. The workers are tired of waiting, and of leading a life of uncertainty, insults, pain and indignity. The least they deserve is some respect from the state for the sacrifices they made for the economic boon of this nation.

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The protestors do not want charity, but if you would like to donate food, medicines, blankets etc. so they may continue their demonstration, please email: sspreetha@gmail.com

Challenges to sustainable financing for South Asian countries

MACRO MIRROR



FAHMIDA KHATUN

THE global financial landscape has been under stress for a long time. Since the adoption of the 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) by the world leaders in 2015, efforts have been ongoing to mobilise resources to implement these goals. Despite commitments by various governments and international organisations, there are large financial gaps in the developing countries. The United Nations Conference on Trade and Development (UNCTAD) estimated that the implementation of the SDGs by 2030 will require annual investment of about USD 3.3-4.5 trillion in the SDG-related sectors. But there will be an annual financial gap of about USD 2.5 trillion in implementing the SDGs. Similar estimations were also done by other international organisations. The International Monetary Fund (IMF) indicates that in the low and lower middle-income countries additional annual spending of USD 528 billion will be required to meet the targets of education, health, roads, electricity, and water and sanitation by 2030.

Due to the Covid-19 pandemic, the challenges to achieving the SDGs have deepened. As of now, no country in the world is on track to meet all the goals by 2030. The financial gaps observed in a number of critically important sectors make the achievement of the SDGs more difficult. Investment needs in sectors such as power infrastructure, climate change mitigation, transport infrastructure, health and education, are also huge.

South Asian countries are no different in terms of facing financial constraints for developing and improving their physical and social infrastructure. This gap was high even before Covid-19 hit these countries. With the outbreak of the

coronavirus pandemic, these economies have experienced significant economic disruptions. Contraction in outputs and interruptions in the supply chain in these economies have led to reduction in their gross domestic product (GDP). Recent (October 2020) estimates by the IMF reveals bleak growth prospects in all South Asian countries. It is projected by the IMF that in 2020, real GDP growth in Bangladesh will be 3.8 percent, in India negative (-) 10.3 percent, in Nepal 0.0 percent (no growth), in Pakistan negative (-) 0.4 percent and in Sri Lanka negative (-) 4.6 percent. Projections by the World Bank in June 2020 also shows poor prospect of growth in the region, in general.

The negative impact of the coronavirus pandemic is also being reflected in many other ways. Private investment and consumption have fallen. Indeed, private investment is not picking up in the region despite its high demand. Employment has also declined. South Asia's labour market is particularly vulnerable since about 75 percent of employment is in the informal sector. In Bangladesh, informal sector employment is 85.1 percent of total employment according to the Labour Force Survey 2016-17 of Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics. The pandemic has forced a reverse migration of these informal workers to the rural areas as they lost their jobs.

Therefore, since the Covid-19 crisis began, governments in the region have faced a dual challenge. On the one hand, they have to increase their resource base to continue their development expenditures, create employment, and achieve economic growth. On the other hand, they need to urgently increase social spending, particularly in healthcare and social protection.

However, substantive resource gaps deter these economies from spending what is required. Domestic revenue mobilisation effort has always been lower than expected in these countries. This is not only because of the low per capita income of people, but also because of low revenue-GDP ratio in these countries. Due to weak tax

administration and poor tax infrastructure, tax net is narrow and tax evasion is high. Revenue as a percentage of GDP is only 13.2 percent in South Asia as opposed to the global average of 24.3 percent as of 2018. The pandemic may shrink revenue mobilisation further as income of individuals and businesses have reduced.

Due to a narrow domestic resource base, the South Asian countries have limited fiscal space. This has constrained the ability of governments in the region to fund their development initiatives and improve the quality of social services. Therefore, it is apprehended that many achievements made by these countries during the pre-Covid period may be reversed due to the Covid-induced economic hardship. Hence, not only is it important to make economic and social progress, but protecting the progress made during the last several decades is also a critical task for these countries.

Governments will have to work hard to generate more domestic resources and utilise them in a prudent manner. But the international community will also have to extend further support. Unfortunately, even before the pandemic, the prospect of external development finance such as direct investment (FDI), remittances and development assistance (ODA) were not encouraging. Covid-19 has further reduced these opportunities. According to the recent Investment Monitor report of the UNCTAD, due to the economic fallout from the pandemic, global FDI flows have declined to USD 399 billion or by 49 percent during the first half of 2020 compared to 2019. The Asian region saw the lowest decline of 12 percent due to the resilience of Chinese investment. However, the South Asian countries experienced a drop of their investment by 31 percent. And within South Asia, India has seen a decline of 33 percent of FDI inflow. At the current level of investment, the development objectives of the South Asian countries will not be fulfilled.

Though FDI still holds the most important source of external finance in

developing economies, remittances and ODA are the major sources of external development finance for the least developed countries (LDCs). The role of remittances is prominent in Bangladesh and Nepal. Despite, Covid-19, higher remittance flow was observed both in Bangladesh and Nepal. However, given the uncertainty on global economic recovery, strong remittance flow is also unpredictable in the coming months.

The role of ODA has declined over time in the region. However, for social sectors such as health and education ODA still plays an important role, particularly in the South Asian LDCs. The recently published report on Multilateral Development Finance 2020 by the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) highlights the significance of effective multilateral development financial system, to deliver on the promises of the Agenda 2030 and support the recovery of developing countries from the ongoing Covid-19 crisis. Despite such realisation, the developed countries have not fulfilled their commitment to provide 0.7 percent of their gross national income (GNI) as ODA. In 2019, only four countries, such as Denmark, Luxembourg, Sweden, and the United Kingdom had met this commitment.

The grim outlook for external development finance indicates that the South Asian countries will have to put in more effort to generate the required financing for the recovery of their respective economies from the pandemic and to protect their achievements. This should come through higher revenue and savings. But the need for international development finance cannot be undermined. The solution to the paramount development challenges faced by the South Asian countries requires sustainable financing through resources mobilisation from multiple sources.

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Views expressed in this article are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect the position of her organisation.