The Daily Star

FOUNDER EDITOR
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DHAKA MONDAY NOVEMBER 30, 2020, AGRAHAYAN 15, 1427 BS

Why delay giving incentives to frontline workers?

Govt should fulfil its commitment

IT is distressing to learn that the commitment of the government to give incentives of various denominations, to those at the vanguard of our battle against the pandemic, have not received what they were promised. According to a report in this paper yesterday, none of the government frontline workers infected with coronavirus has received the compensation they were promised seven months ago. And compensation for less than a third of the 133 frontline workers who died with Covid-19 have been given as of November 4. And when the health minister says that the doctors would be compensated soon, how soon will be soon is what we ask.

It was at the very early stage of the pandemic that the prime minister had announced compensation for the frontline workers engaged to fight a disease whose onset was as unexpected as was its effects and consequences an unknown quantity. In early April a package of special incentives for Covid-19 frontline workers was announced by the PM that included special insurance incentives for Covid-19 frontline fighters, health insurance of Tk 5-10 lakh according to rank and the amount was to be five times higher if anyone was at higher risk of death or died from the virus. Moreover, the government took upon itself the responsibility for the treatment cost of frontline workers contracting virus while on duty. This was a salutary step and for which an amount of Tk 750 crore was allotted.

The announcement was made at a time when there was unmitigated apprehension about the disease which itself was a disincentive for many health workers. The situation was compounded by not only a lack of proper personal protective gears but also their poor quality. The pandemic came as a boon for some opportunists to reap a rich harvest at the expense of the people's health. The consequence is visible in the casualty rate of the frontline workers, particularly the law enforcers and doctors. According to officials, nearly 30,000 doctors, health workers, administration officials, members of police and Rab, had tested positive for coronavirus. It is assumed that the figures might be higher.

The reason why the money as promised has not been disbursed is because there are chances of misuse of Covid-19 positive test results. Could there be anything more ludicrous than this coming from a government official, who also said that it was uncertain whether the frontline government officials infected with Covid-19 would get the compensation at all. While we agree that there are chances of misuse of the system, we believe it is for the agencies and department heads to verify the authenticity of a document. And that goes for Covid-19 test results too. But not to deliver on a promise made by the prime minister just because there are chances that the process might be misused is a soppy excuse and abdication of responsibility. These frontline workers have risked their lives to save others, many succumbing to the virus in the process. Providing them with some financial support is an apt way of showing gratitude for their sacrifices. Failing to meet a government commitment will sap people's confidence on it. It is important to remember that a second pandemic onset may be round the corner.

Death of a patient in BSMMU as both her kidneys removed

Arrest the doctors and staff involved, punish them for murder

WE are outraged at the death of a kidney patient in the capital's Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujib Medical University (BSMMU) in 2018, as doctors removed both her kidneys instead of the one that was infected. Although the patient's son tried to file a case against the doctors involved for his mother's death, he could not do so in these two years because of the lack of cooperation from the police and other authorities concerned. It took him two years only to get the autopsy report from the Dhaka Medical College forensic department, without which police did not want to register the case. Shahbagh police finally filed the case last Friday, only after the National Human Rights Commission issued a notice in this regard.

According to our report, Rafique Sikder, a filmmaker, admitted his 55-year-old mother Rawshan Ara to BSMMU for kidney treatment on July 1, 2018. After conducting multiple tests, doctors at the hospital advised to remove her left kidney and Rawshan had undergone the operation on September 5 that year. As her condition started deteriorating fast after the surgery and there was no vacancy at the ICU of BSMMU, Rafique took his mother to another private hospital in the city. Following diagnosis, doctors at the hospital found that both the patient's kidneys were missing! Rawshan Ara died on October 31, 2018.

Deaths from wrong treatment, lack of treatment and medical negligence are, sadly, a common phenomenon in our hospitals, for which doctors are hardly held accountable. But this particular case revealed the criminal intention of some of our doctors, as they removed the woman's kidney in a "planned manner with an ill intention", as accused by her son.

We hope police will waste no time in investigating the case and arresting the doctors and staff involved in the woman's death. The reason why the doctors removed both the patients' kidneys must be found out to know whether it was a mere accident, or if they were involved with any human organ trafficking gang. Those involved in the crime should be punished according to the law; the family of the patient deserves justice.

16 Days of Activism against Gender-based Violence

Women and girls must feel safe everywhere

MACRO MIRROR

Fahmida Khatun

THE significance of this year's "16 Days of Activism against Gender Based Violence" initiative of the United Nations is greater than ever before in view of the ongoing coronavirus pandemic. Activities under this initiative performed from November 25 to December 10 each year since 1991 have focused on prevention and elimination of violence against women and girls, which is becoming widespread day by day. The coronavirus pandemic has exacerbated this in many ways that range from physical, psychological, sexual and economic.

Since the outbreak of the pandemic, the health crisis rapidly turned into economic and social crises. The global economy has been shattered from various fronts. Outputs have fallen, employment declined, income eroded and poverty intensified across the world. With production and supply chain disrupted, investment and exports interrupted and economic opportunities lost, countries are struggling to revive their economies.

Along with economic crisis, social problems have escalated. Evidences across countries indicate that women and girls have been affected disproportionately during this crisis. Economic insecurity coupled with social distancing have increased the likelihood of more violence against women and girls as people stay at home more than before. This has been related to the pandemic-induced household stress. Besides, as schools are closed, boys of poor families are sent for income earning activities while girls are being married off even at an early age. Parents do not want to take the burden of feeding extra mouths and girls are considired a burden to get rid on.

In Bangladesh, a telephone survey conducted by the Manusher Jonno Foundation (MJF) between January and October 2020 revealed that 1,086 women and children were raped. Among the victims, 277 were gang raped, 50 were killed and 29 committed suicide. This is an irony of the twenty-first-century, when women are increasingly involved in economic activities but are also being abused in various ways.

Women's participation in the labour force has increased over time in Bangladesh. According to the Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics, women's participation rate in the labour force has increased to 36.3 percent compared to 23.9 percent in 2000. They are not only engaged in the agriculture sector and the readymade garments industry, but also in several other activities. Of the total female labour force, 59.7 percent are engaged in agriculture, 16.8 percent in industry, 15.4 percent in manufacturing and 23.5 percent in services sector.

Many women have joined non-traditional and emerging service sectors such as banking, insurance, telecommunications, hotel and restaurants, transport and real estate services. Higher education and skills have contributed to this rise. It is undeniable that women's economic empowerment has helped to improve their social status. Within their families, they are valued by their families, some of them can express their opinions on family issues. Their income has contributed towards improving nutritional status of their families, increasing education of their children, reducing child marriage, and lowering maternal and child mortality rates.

Indeed, Bangladesh's performance in case of achieving several targets of the Millennium Development Goals has been possible to a large extent due to women's achievements and contributions. Since Bangladesh's independence non-government organisations began working in rural areas. Their intervention has helped in improving women's economic and social status. Micro credit programmes of these organisations have provided them opportunities to earn an income through small businesses. Government policies and support measures have also helped improve women's situation. Higher education among urban women has helped them to join the formal labour market and earn better.

However, the achievements made thus far in the area of women's empowerment has been overshadowed by unstoppable violence against women. They are abused in their own homes, at their relative's and friend's place, at workplaces, at educational institutes, on transports, on the street—everywhere. No place is safe for them. Even if women are accompanied by their fathers, brothers or other male relatives, there is no guarantee of their security. The sharp claws of perverted men chase them, haunt them, and finally, kill them.

What are the reasons for violence against women? This answer is not a straightforward one. Clearly,

economic empowerment is not enough to stop violence against women. Violence is performed due to an imbalanced power relation between women and men. This is a bigger structural issue. There are social, cultural, phycological, economic and political reasons behind such violence.

The cultural circumstances within which we live in are all about displaying money and power, and undermining others. This also determines the social status. Money gives the license to ignore rules. The powerful ones feel that they have the right to harm the weaker ones. No one can protest if the powerful people torture the weak and vulnerable ones—both men and women. Poor men and women are in the same boat in many ways. Power relations determine the behaviour and attitude towards people in the society. That is why we read about innocent poor boys and men being tortured and beaten to death brutally in front of onlookers. Violence against women is done from similar mentality. Besides, men violate women and girls, if they want to shut them off or punish their families. Men believe if a woman is violated, the whole family is demolished forever in the eyes of the society.

Political factors play the most important role in shaping the whole power relations among people. In the absence of the rule of law in a society where perpetrators are not punished, all types of crimes will continue to increase. Rapist or murderers tend to take shelter in political parties. They find safety in political leaders after committing crimes. The law enforcing agencies cannot take any action against them unless it is instructed by the supreme authority. Even those who do not have any connections with the powerful people, also commit violence against women and men. They believe that they can get away with crimes. The culture of lawlessness encourages men to torture and violate women.

If women do not feel safe, they will be hesitant to work outside. Their families will not allow them to go out. This will be a backward move. The achievements made during the last five decades by Bangladeshi women will be lost if corrective measures are not taken. If the growth momentum of Bangladesh is to continue, women must take part in the labour market at an increasing rate. They will have to have opportunities. This will require education, appropriate training and technological knowledge. In case of education, gender parity at the primary school level has been achieved. The number of girl students has also increased at the secondary level. However, at the tertiary level, female students' participation rate is much lower than male students. This is reflected in the type of work women are engaged in. Their participation in administrative, managerial, technical and professional jobs is low. Most women work in low paying jobs. About 91 percent women work in the informal sector. Those who are entrepreneurs, lack adequate finance, training, marketing opportunities and information to scale up their business and also survive during crisis such as the coronavirus pandemic.

However, no matter what measures are taken to improve women's economic situation, violence against them must be stopped. They have to feel safe both at home and outside home.

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World Bank urges governments to guarantee private profits

Jomo Kwame Sundaram *and* Anis Chowdhury

The World Bank has been leading other multilateral development banks (MDBs) and international financial institutions to press developing country governments to "de-risk" infrastructure and other private, especially foreign investments.

They promote public-private partnerships (PPPs) supposedly to mobilise more private finance to achieve the Sustainable Development Goals. PPP advocacy has been stepped up after developing countries' pleas for better international tax cooperation were blocked at the third United Nations' Financing for Development conference (FfD3) in Addis Ababa in mid-2015.

Official support for infrastructure PPPs seems stronger than ever. The Bank's Global Infrastructure Facility (GIF) was set up to coordinate MDBs, private investors and governments promoting PPPs. Meanwhile, the G20 has been trying to modify the mandates of national and international development banks to enable them to initiate infrastructure PPPs with the private sector.

De-risking?

The World Bank's latest Guidance on PPP Contractual Provisions measures progress in terms of "successfully procured PPP transactions". The Bank explicitly recommends "de-risking" PPPs, effectively involving "socialising" risks and privatising profits.

But the term "de-risking" is misleading as some risk is inherent in all project investments. After all, projects may encounter problems due to planning mistakes, poor implementation or unexpected developments. Hence, Bank advice does not really seek to reduce, let alone eliminate risk, but simply to make governments bear and absorb it.

Thus, "de-risking" really means shifting risk from private investors to governments for more contingencies, including design, planning or implementation failures by private partners. This ignores the Bank's Growth Commission's concern that "In too many cases, the division of labour has put profits in private hands, and risks in the public lap".

Off the books, out of sight

Both World Bank and International Monetary Fund (IMF) research has found many governments using PPPs and other similar arrangements to keep such projects "off the books" of official central government accounts, effectively reducing transparency and accountability, while compromising governance.

Such project financing typically involves government-guaranteed—rather than direct government—liabilities. Not booked as government development or capital expenditure, it is also not counted as part of sovereign or government debt, e.g., for parliamentary reporting and accountability.

Instead, project costs are supposed to be paid for, over time, by direct user fees or government operational or current expenditure. Hence, most governments do not extend their normal accountability procedures to cover such expenditure and related debt.

The Fund has even warned of likely abuse of such seemingly "easy" or "free" money, emphasising the dangers of taking more government debt and risk "off the books". This is very significant as the IMF rarely criticises Bank recommendations and advice, even indirectly.

Shifting responsibility

PPP financing is typically booked as government-guaranteed liabilities, rather than as sovereign debt per se. Being "off the books", governments face fewer constraints to taking on ever more debt and risk. With such commitments, they also become much more vulnerable to "unforeseen" costs.

Such contractual arrangements, typically set by private partners in most PPPs, do little to improve governance and accountability. To be sure, normal government budgetary accounting and audit procedures for PPPs may not meaningfully improve transparency and accountability.

As such financing arrangements are typically long-term, related government risks are correspondingly long-term, lasting decades in many cases. This tempts "short-termist" governments "of the day" to make long-term commitments they are unlikely to be held personally accountable for in the near to medium-term.

Moral hazard

World Bank guidance is clear that even a private partner who fails to deliver as contracted must be compensated for work done before a government can terminate a contract. Whether private partners actually deliver as promised does not seem to matter to the Bank which provides no guidance for addressing their failures to meet contractual obligations.

The Bank thus contributes to "moral hazard" in PPPs: the less likely the private partner stands to lose from poor performance, the less incentive it has to meet contractual obligations. Guaranteeing cost recovery, revenue and profit erodes the motive to deliver as promised and to consider project risks.

Enthusiastic PPP promotion—by the Bank, other MDBs and donors urging developing country governments to bear more risk—is not only encouraging "moral hazard", but also creating more opportunities for the corruption and abuse they profess to lament.

Instead, private partners have greater incentives to try gouging rents from government partners, e.g., by renegotiating existing contracts to their advantage. Conversely, governments have to choose between bearing the costs of failed projects, and paying even more to save problematic ones in the hope of cutting losses.

Faced with such choices, governments have little choice but to accede to their private partners' demands. Bank guidance has thus further undermined governments in their dealings with private partners, who are now better able to demand improved contractual conditions for themselves, at the expense of their government partners.

Ignoring evidence

Many governments can undertake large infrastructure projects themselves, or alternatively, make much better procurement arrangements. IMF research has also found, "In many countries, PPPs have not always performed better than public procurement".

Ironically, Bank research has shown that "well-run public firms tend to match the performance of private firms in regulated sectors", concluding, "There is no 'killer' rationale for public-private partnerships".

Even the Bank's Research Observer has published a summary of "some of the most compelling examples of this kind of emerging critique" of infrastructure PPPs in telecoms, transport, water and sanitation, waste management and electricity.

Yet, the Bank continues to promote PPPs as the preferred mode of infrastructure financing, trying to shift more risk to governments, ostensibly to attract more private investment. Meanwhile, Bank guidance typically fails to warn governments of the risks involved and their implications.

Prejudiced guidance

Bank and other PPP advocates dismiss criticisms as "ideological" despite growing empirical evidence. Such damning findings have had little impact on their PPP advocacy. Instead, the new fad is for more "blended finance" to PPPs, using official concessional finance to subsidise and attract more private investment.

However, as *The Economist* has found, "blended finance has struggled to grow" as MDBs mobilise less than USD 1 of private capital for every public dollar. It concluded, "early hopes may simply have been too starry-eyed. A trillion-dollar market seems well out of reach. Even making it to the hundreds of billions a year may be a stretch".

Unsurprisingly, despite Bank, donor and other efforts, PPPs have only generated 15-20 percent of developing countries' infrastructure investments, according to the Bank's Independent Evaluation Group, while remaining negligible in the poorest countries.

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