

## Servicing the Basic Services: Electricity

Imagination is more important than knowledge  
— Albert Einstein

# Women, Children and Electricity An Unfocused Issue

by Lailufar Yasmin

*Some of the respondents expressed their anxieties and fears of insecurity at night during long hours of load shedding. Also women who subcontract tailoring work face severe problems due to the unavailability of electricity as they cannot run their electric sewing machines.*

LOAD shedding is one of the most annoying civic problems of our time. We often highlight various economic, social and national problems associated with load shedding. But, we usually tend to ignore its gender dimension, i.e. the problems faced by women specifically. The works of women, especially that of the housewives who deal with "essential and inevitable duties" of day-to-day life are not often given due importance and the right perspective. It really does not matter whether electricity is available at home or not. Actually, we tend to overlook that the unpaid works of family and home management are equally important like official works and that women's "invisible contribution" help in reproducing the capitalist world. Therefore, the availability of electricity at home is something essential.

While deliberating upon it, I discussed this issue with several "sufferers". Random sampling was taken and attention was given to cover the most affected areas of Dhaka. The most pressing problem identified by the respondents is the interruption and inadequacy of water supply of the WASA, particularly when load shedding starts. As there was no set or declared timetable for load shedding, in most cases people are not prepared and often the water tanks are empty. As a result, the housewife, sometimes along with a maid, must fetch water from the reservoir tank. That is not all, she has to abandon all her domestic works for collecting good quantity of water at least for that day, if not more.

But these days, as some of the respondents pointed out, they could well guess about the possible time of load shedding and therefore keep the water tanks filled well before electricity goes off. One of our respondents mentioned an exceptional case. During the time of severe load shedding faced in the city, she and her mother had to stay awake, sometimes

literally for the whole night waiting for the electricity to come and restore the water supply.

Another problem is the maintenance of electronic appliances due to random load shedding and low voltage of electricity. When electronic appliances were not there, women were not much dependent on them for their household works. But, with the easy access to electricity and numerous domestic appliances, women's daily life now revolves around the availability of electricity. For instance, a refrigerator is no longer a luxury item, rather it has now become a necessity. If there is no electricity for a whole day, not only the stored foods and vegetables get rotten, but interruption of power supply and voltage fluctuation affects the performance of the refrigerator. At the same time, all the dirty linens piled up together remains unwashed because power was not available to run the machine. Even a low voltage hampers the operation and condition of the major electronic appliances like television, washing machine, microwave, iron etc.

Women with children face multifaceted problems. It is always a problem for mothers to feed their children. In this context, mothers find television handy since nowadays multiple channels are available to keep babies entertained and amused as they eat their food. In fact, some of the respondents informed that their babies take food only when their favourite television programmes, like cartoon, advertisements, etc., are on. Therefore, if the electricity fails, mothers have tough time feeding their babies. This puts pressure on normal household chores.

The source of entertainment for the children totally stops, there is no light, no fan and the heat makes the entire environment very clumsy and more so for the mothers to tackle the situation. At the same time, in the hot humid weather of summer when it is tough for us to survive without fans, it is also quite difficult to make the babies' sleep. Sometimes the mothers along with the babies have to stay awake throughout the night.

It also becomes very difficult for the children to engage in study in the heat. One of the re-

spondents said that, they had to buy a new charger, which has an in-built fan with it to ensure comfort for the children during their studies.

Some of the respondents expressed their anxieties and fears of insecurity at night during long hours of load shedding. Also women who subcontract tailoring work face severe problems due to the unavailability of electricity as they cannot run their electric sewing machines.

When asked to suggest ways to mitigate problems created due to load shedding, they lim-

ited their answers to the following. Firstly, the timings of load shedding should be informed in advance so that women could plan their daily works accordingly. Secondly, electric supply to households ought to be women-children centric. That is, load shedding should be avoided when women and children need the most (for instance, during eating times, study times, etc.). Thirdly, the apartment and housing complexes may set up amusement/day-care centres with generator facilities within their compounds for mothers and children.

But, of course, this is not enough. Will creative minds come forward and provide alternative means towards resolving the problem?

Lailufar Yasmin is a freelance researcher.



How long to brace the brunt of this bane?

— Star photo

## Unloading Loadshedding: A Survey Report

*Inhabitants of Dhanmondi Road No. 32 and its nearby areas are enjoying uninterrupted power supply. Minimum load shedding that range from 0-1 time a day occurs in the area covering Gulshan, Banani, Uttara, Minto road and Cantonment.*

"LOADSHEDDING" may be defined as an emergency operation in any power system according to which electric supply to certain areas is cut off for a certain period of time due to overload upon the existing power system. In fact the term "loadshedding" has now become a non-technical term — the talk of the town. Loadshedding particularly in Dhaka City has taken a serious turn. Power is cut off three to four times a day without prior notice causing immense sufferings to the City dwellers.

Considering the immense concern amongst the public about the disruption in the power supply as well as the suffering, we carried out a study on the issue so that an agreeable solution to the crisis could be found.

Dhaka City has been chosen as the better place to conduct our research since the larger portion of the 16 per cent of our population that have access to electricity resides in this area and maximum power consumption occurs in this part of our country.

The survey has been carried out among 200 power consumers, which include mainly the businessmen, service holders, housewives and students.

Our first query was about the major problems caused by loadshedding. In response 51 per cent complained of educational problems, 35 per cent mentioned economic problems, 25 per cent talked of poor factory production.

We found that Narayanganj, Old Dhaka, Motijheel-Kakrail, Kamalapur-Malibagh, Mirpur and their surrounding areas face the problem most frequently and the current goes off 3-4 times or more every day. While moderate shedding that is 1-3 times every day occurs in the area covering Dhanmondi-Lalmatia-Mohammadpur, Farmgate, Shamoli, Elephant road, Central road, Jhikatola and their surrounding areas. It may be mentioned here that inhabitants of Dhanmondi Road No. 32 and its nearby areas are

enjoying uninterrupted power supply. Minimum load shedding that range from 0-1 time a day occurs in the area covering Gulshan, Banani, Uttara, Minto road and Cantonment.

Respondents expressed their utter dismay and frustration when asked to express the feelings they experience right at the moment the current goes off. Some people expressed their wish to leave the country thinking about the grave consequences. Young people are generally frustrated and irritated, as they are not able to complete their scheduled work. Frequent shedding of load creates too much mental pressure and the individuals are gradually losing patience in doing their work properly and timely.

The people blamed different authorities for loadshedding. On this, 47 per cent blamed the Government, 14 per cent blamed PDB, 11 per cent DESA, 11 per cent identified the misuse of power as the prime cause of loadshedding. 5 per cent complained about illegal connection. 5 per cent blamed the previous government and 4 per cent held population increase to be responsible.

Economy appeared to be the sector hardest hit due to loadshedding. Respondents pointed out that all kind of social activities are disrupted due to power failure. Household work, education of students is greatly hampered. One cottage industrialist expressed his dismay at the fact that he has to pay his labours their regular wage even when the factory remained close for most of the working hours. Adding to it, anti-social activities such as hijacking, kidnapping, pick pocketing, sexual harassment, etc., have multiplied.

When asked of their opinion about the government policy of closing the market place at 7.00p.m. almost 100 per cent criticized the policy as an im-

proper and inappropriate one. Some even complained that it is only encouraging crime for the law enforcing agents since most of them take supplementary (bribes) from the shop-owners, allowing the shopkeepers to keep their shops open after 7.00 p.m.

The group carried out a series of interviews. From these we have learned that one of the main reasons of loadshedding is the problem of maintenance and rehabilitation of existing power plants. Of the total number of powerhouses in the country some 25 per cent are always

*The situation relating to supply against the peak hour demand has deteriorated. The situation turns critical when availability of power falls short of the increased demand in the months of April, May, June, July. According to PDB sources, the availability of power during peak hour demand is around 1400mw as against the requirement of 2300mw.*

In the process of overhauling. This is a continuous process and needs constant monitoring. Knowledgeable experts claim that the simple act of giving work order to the successful bidder gets delayed.

What goes under the euphemism of loadshedding is in fact a huge theft of power, which is not monitored by any author-

ity. Unless this corruption is remedied no amount of new power would be of any avail.

Another problem is the poor managerial aspect of power management. A section of the employees are corrupted and the executives are simply prisoners in their hands. What goes on in the name of trade unionism is nothing but a kind of bullying and the executives often have to go along with the selfish demands of the union office-bearers. The situation relating to supply against the peak hour demand has deteriorated. The situation turns critical when

put it between 150MW to 200MW.

### RECOMMENDATIONS

**Immediate**  
Public awareness may be created to minimize peak hour's electricity consumption and conservation of electricity by advertising through television, radio and newspapers. Even few documentary films and short films can be shot to create public awareness.

Regulatory measures may be taken for revenue collection of PDB & DESA.

Strict regulatory measures may be taken to stop non-technical system losses.

Two rates of tariff for domestic consumers for peak and off-peak hours may be introduced.

### Mid-term

Bangladesh may plan for generation of electricity by setting up small power stations for small specific areas. Distribution of electricity with right quantity of power at the right time at a little higher tariff would also help.

Cascade power stations may be built of 2-6 small generators running in parallel and each generator shall not be of capacity of more than 400/500 kw. The greatest advantage of these cascade power stations incorporating small generators is that local technicians can maintain these and all spares

and components would be available locally. Arrangement may be made for timely procurement of spare parts, training of technical personnel and removal of organizational complexity to take correct and timely decisions.

Use of efficient motors for domestic, industrial and commercial fields may be ensured. Privatization of electricity billing and collection system may be introduced.

**Long-term**  
New gas based plants may be built with a view to make optimal use of our lucrative natural resources, for example, natural gas.

Plan for electricity production from nuclear energy may be implemented. Necessary funds may be arranged both from local and foreign investments.

As a least developed country, power energy is one of the top most requirements for our overall growth and development. The present condition in terms of power deficiencies needs special attention of the appropriate authority concerned. Bangladesh's successful entry into the next millennium depends upon much on how the present power crisis is managed.

*(The above is a summarised version of a report prepared by Ayesha Novera, Ameena Fahmida, Irene Zaman, Lucif Sircar, Mustafa Moinuddin, Nawrin Samrina, Reefat Imam, Rosina Afreen, Sadiya Arman and Shahnaz Parveen, all students of International Relations, Dhaka University.)*

## Electricity in Slums

by Sharmeen Murshid

*One of the major issues in Bangladesh is the lack of sufficient electricity. Perhaps, it is not the lack of sufficient electricity, but the mismanagement and corruption that is the main issue. It has led to a wasteful system with high rates of systems loss.*

IF one visits any of the slums in Nakhalpara or Nilkhet, one of the first things that would strike is the availability of electricity in every household. All the houses have electric light, a ceiling fan, a television and a cassette player among other household furniture like wooden bed and almira. In recent years, the residents say, the standard of life in their slums have improved.

Nakhalpara Basti, badly hit by the floods, for example is a slum where 58 families live each consisting about 7-10 members living in an area of 8ft. X 12ft. All these 58 single roomed houses are made of bamboo walls and a tin roof. The place is owned by a single man who comes to collect rent once a month. It was found that the rent of Taka 1500 per month included the cost of all facilities such as electricity, gas and water. The individual is not concerned with obtaining electric connection or paying bills. It is all handled by the landlord who was not available for discussion.

The floods have created a precarious situation in Nakhalpara. The basti is surrounded with dirty water, dangerously polluted with human waste giving out an unbearable stench. The naked children were playing in that water, sometimes drinking from it. The mothers remained stranded on their beds and chokis. It was found that some families could not feed their children for the last five days due to the flood.

Just above their sheds, at a dangerously low height, there is a web of electric wires, few hundred lines that have been pulled together from all sorts of direction to connect the houses. No meter was found. No tenant seemed to know of any meters. The wires hanging over the water were dangerously threatening.

The same situation was found in Babupura Basti in Nilkhet. Only difference was that the slum was not hit by the floods. Otherwise the whole system of electrification was exactly same. Live wires every where, no meter, no landlord to talk to and no one knows how the connections are made. All they know is that they have to pay the rent, which includes the cost of electricity.

To my mind, the concern here is not the electrification of slums because that has already happened, but how it is happening and what are its implications. As a migrating community, the slum dwellers do not think of long term solutions. In fact they are totally indifferent to such propositions, particularly if it means taking responsibility. As they have quite candidly said, "This is not our problem. It is the landlords' problem." They said they are happy with the present system even if it is dangerous, so why should they want to change it.

The contrast between naked poverty on the one hand and vibrant economic activity and growth on the other makes the slums both hazardous and potentially viable. This is where alternative and creative sys-

tems need to be developed. What are the implications of the present system of electrification of the slums?

The connections are made illegally therefore:

Government gets no revenue; The line is stolen from a legal user who unknowingly bears the burden of payment;

The line men are illegally paid off to help make these connections; thus, the legal system breaks down;

Minimum safety standards are not maintained thus jeopardizing the lives of the people.

The government does not take responsibility and the community is not aware, therefore, local 'god fathers' who control the area are paid to 'take care' of the slums;

Landlords who are politically powerful people retain an iron grip over the slums by giving the slum dwellers 'basic services' that no one else is giving.

One of the major issues in Bangladesh is the lack of sufficient electricity. Perhaps, it is not the lack of sufficient electricity, but the mismanagement

and corruption that is the main issue. It has led to wasteful system with high rates of systems loss. The situation in the slums is not a cause of insufficient electricity but a result and a by-product of a mismanaged system.

The alternative is to let the private sector or the NGOs take over the basic services in the slums. The community is already paying for it. A feasibility and market study can be initiated by the government and then handed over to the private sector. A slum consciousness program may be started by the NGOs, a delivery system developed by the private sector and an initiation by the government can make the difference. The added benefit for the government will be that it will actually earn and not lose from the proposition and for the slum dwellers, they will be getting electricity free of health hazards and corrupt means.

The writer is Executive Director, Brotoe.

## Banks, Bills and Burdens

Continued from page 6

the necessary security arrangements to deal with the huge amount of payments. On the other hand, another bank manager proposed to privatise the system. Limited companies with the proper approval of the Bangladesh Bank and with security deposit may take up the responsibility. Such companies would remain highly accountable to the Bangladesh Bank. He pointed out the example of the money exchange companies recently set up in numbers. If some of these companies can effectively handle money transactions on large scale, so can limited companies concerning bill payment.

On the idea of developing local associations that would collect bills in different localities and send them directly to the DESA or even to the banks, the major problem, in their opinion, is again the question of security. In general, none suggested that banks should be or could be replaced effectively by any other institutions in terms of bill collection, rather other institutions may work side by side with the banks to make the process easier and effective. In other words, most of them perceived the need of further decentralisation of the system.

### About the Payers

#### Complaints

The prevailing misconception about the actual role of the banks in the process of bill payment often leads to the embarrassment of the bank officials and disturbs their regular activities. Frequently the customers turn on the banks with the complaint that, in spite of regular payment they have been warned that their service would be cut off. The bank managers point out that, banks have nothing to do with such complaints. It is the duty of the banks to submit the statements, about collected payments, within a week to the DESA office. Afterwards, it is the responsibility of the officials of the concerned office to make entry of the statements properly in the ledger book. Therefore the actual fault, according to the bank officials, most of the time lies with the DESA or other authorities. Driven by some sort of wrong idea, the bank officials are also sometimes asked to calculate the extra fees due on a customer for delayed payment. One official in this regard, felt the need of properly informing the public about the procedures of bill payment through projection in the media.

#### The Option of Bill Box

I also asked the concerned bank managers about the feasibility of setting up several bill

boxes inside the banks where customers can drop their payments in cheque. The respondents, however, did not find such option much attractive as, in their opinion, this may enhance the scope of fraudulent practice by some of the customers. Some people almost inevitably try to evade payments by submitting false cheques. One of them held that such option could be effective only if the payers are highly conscious and educated. Given the realities of Bangladesh, constant supervision of payments by the officials is highly required.

#### Cheque or Cash?

Another major complaint of the payers is that some banks make the process difficult by not accepting cheques and demanding cash instead. All of the banks I visited, however, receive cheques on the condition that they are 'Good for Payment', that is, the managers have to guarantee for the payment. The bank managers' opinion about certain banks or their branches rejecting cheques was that in some areas of the city, possibilities of fraudulence is so high that the banks need to take some extra-precautionary measures. They, of course, do agree that payment in cheque minimises the problems of the payers.

The present system of bill payment not only is problematic for those who are standing in queues, but it also put some extra pressure on the bankers as well; not withstanding the fact that driven by profit motive, banks often keenly compete to acquire the responsibility of payment collection within the existing framework. Some measures may, however, be taken to make the process easier for both the bankers and general people. As it comes out from the discussion with the bank managers, such measures may include: 1) initiating the establishment of separate booths with all the banks which collect payments; 2) paying the bills at an earlier stage rather than on the last date; 3) provide the banks with a service charge, that would be employed mainly in improving the bill payment procedure; 4) develop other institutions for bill collection, side by side with banks; 5) enhance co-ordination between the banks and the DESA or other concerned authorities etc. Above all, a bit of patience on the part of the bank officials may help to improve the conditions. The whole situation demands a lot of goodwill and understanding on both sides — the bank officials and the people.

The writer is Fellow, Centre for Alternatives



You can call it 'weird wires'. Just imagine, what happens if a fire breaks out, accidentally? — Star photo