

# Is human life worth less than the price of a Louis Vuitton handbag?

QUAMRUL HAIDER

I wouldn't be surprised if on Valentine's Day, a garment factory owner in Bangladesh gift's his wife or mistress or girlfriend a Louis Vuitton handbag priced anywhere between \$30,00 and \$5,000. That's cheap! If he has class, he may serenade her in a \$50,00 a night hotel suite with a partial view of the Central Park in New York, take her out for dinner at the Maxim's, and go on a diamond-buying spree at the Tiffany's. If he is really romantic and at the same time wants to announce loudly to his fellow kin how much he is worth, he will rent the yacht "Monkey Business" and sail to Bimini Island in the Bahamas with his lady love. If he is a stag, he may spend \$1,250 per hour for a female escort's company in New York City or Las Vegas.

Now, let me ask the \$1,250 question: Who are the people fueling the lavish lifestyle of the rich and famous, or may be not so famous, of Bangladesh? The answer, dear readers, is the lowly garment factory workers, mostly young females, who would otherwise panhandle, or work as a tortured maid, or end up leading an ignominious life in a house of ill-repute. They are toiling, they are sweating, and they are dying, so that the owners may live a life of luxury and opulence.

Why am I chastising these "honest" industrialists who have made fortunes from a legitimate business? I have nothing against these people. They can do whatever they want with their "hard-earned" money. I do not want to be the Ralph Nader of Bangladesh. I am happy as a professor of modest means. But the recent deaths of over 100 workers at the Tazreen Fashions Limited, ironically at a place called Nischintapur, caused by a fire that could have been prevented made me ponder, "How much is a human life worth?" I didn't have to do a Google search for the answer. Bangladesh Garment Manufacturers and Exporters Association (BGMEA) provided me with the answer -- loud and clear: it is \$1,250. Is this some sort of a cruel joke? Frankly, if this is a barometer of the moral climate of Bangladesh, then it stinks!

Did our bacchanalian lust for wealth made us forget that human life is priceless? Drowned in wealth and insulated from the harsh realities of life, these people are obviously blind to the fact that as the only earning member in the family, the death of garment workers shatters the dreams of their dear ones. Who will now pay for their children's education and marriage? Who will put food on the dinner plates? Have the owners even paused for a moment and thought about this? No matter how distasteful it is, I guess for someone making less than \$50 per month, BGMEA reckons that \$1,250 in the kitty should be more than enough to see through the family for the rest of their life! Shamefully, this puts life at the same level as buying food with discount coupons in a supermarket.

There is nothing new in death. It is inevitable.

What bothers me is how the living, particularly the rich in Bangladesh, regard the dead. In the United States, the justice system considers human life precious, thus making any form of slavery or unregulated labor practice illegal. The price tag put on a single life for accidental death was \$6.8 million during the "baby" Bush administration. It has gone up since President Barack Obama took office, and is adjusted upward every year to factor in inflation. It is even higher, \$9.1 million, if death is caused by pollution-related diseases.

It is not the job of BGMEA to quantify one's life in terms of money. Every human life is unique and irreplaceable. So, let the actuaries do the calculation they have been trained to do; they have the metric to determine what should be the price tag for a human life. In the meantime, the least BGMEA can do is to ensure that the family's standard of living, if they have any, and aspirations of their dependents are

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have to die to stir the conscience of the owners.

If Bangladesh doesn't want to be grouped with Pakistan as amongst those countries where industrial criminals can get away without being prosecuted and penalised, the government has to swing into action and enforce each and every law in the book to the letter to protect workers' lives and rights. As noted by Thomas Jefferson: "The care of human life and happiness, and not their destruction, is the first and only object of good government."

American consumers are angry. They will put a lot of pressure on retail stores to boycott garments from Bangladesh. After the latest fire incident, New York Times reports: "Activists say that global clothing brands like Tommy Hilfiger and the Gap and those sold by Wal-Mart need to take responsibility for the working conditions in Bangladeshi factories that produce their clothes. These brands have known for years that many of the factories they choose to work with are death traps." Today, Wal-Mart announced a partial pull-out. Tomorrow, it could be Sears, or J. C. Penney, or Macy's. Next time I go to these or other stores to purchase clothing, I will make sure that the label does not read "Made in Bangladesh."

When will the garment tycoons of Bangladesh realise that without the dead serfs, the big buyers, and millions of consumers like me, the \$20 billion a year bubble may soon burst? They will then have to be content with Big Buddha Handbags, Holiday Inn for romancing and St. Martin's Island for vacation. Perhaps they don't care. They may have accumulated enough wealth to last a few generations.

Bill Gates is a multi-billionaire. So is Warren Buffett. But their lifestyle belies their wealth. They share it with the poor of the world. They take care of their employees by providing life, disability, and health insurances. Funds are set aside to pay for the retirement benefit of the workers. They get handsome bonus and paid vacation days. Why is there resistance to put these measures in place for Bangladeshi workers?

It is high time the millionaires and billionaires of Bangladesh are given a lesson on philanthropy and humanity. They should also learn how to run a business with a heart. It won't hurt them to spare a few dimes for the poor. It won't make them poor; it will make them good human beings, at the least. And they won't have to go to Mecca every year to reserve a suite in the heaven.

Finally, Bangladeshi industrialists will do themselves mighty good if they imbibe the following words of wisdom from Lord Buddha: "Just as treasures are uncovered from the earth, so virtue appears from good deeds, and wisdom appears from a pure and peaceful mind. To walk safely through the maze of human life, one needs the light of wisdom and the guidance of virtue."

The writer is Professor, Department of Physics & Engineering Physics, Fordham University, New York.

## Disability issue: Development or charity?

NIGAR SULTANA

THE International Day of Persons with Disabilities (IDPD) is a worldwide annual commemoration authorised by United Nations to focus on the theme of "removing barriers to create an inclusive and accessible society for all." This day was first observed on December 3, 1992 as "International Day of Disabled Persons."

It is no secret that the number of persons with disabilities has noticeably increased worldwide in the past decade. A UN report says that over one billion people, approximately 15% of the world's population, have some form of disability. Besides, persons with disabilities are considered as the world's most marginalised people, whose needs, beliefs and concerns are not acknowledged by society. In this context, accessibility and inclusion of persons with disabilities are established as fundamental rights recognised by the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD) that give an understanding of people with disability and encourage support for their dignity, rights and well-being. Hence, UN organisations, governments, civil society and organisations of persons with disabilities work together to implement the UN development agenda to promote the full and effective participation of persons with disabilities in society and development, along with legal acts for ensuring human rights like free and appropriate compulsory education. It is internationally acknowledged that disability is a development concern.

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In relation to the worldwide present scenario of disability concern, what about the persons with disabilities in Bangladesh?

Keep pace with other countries of the world the people of Bangladesh also take part in various ways to observe IDPD. Events ranging from grand rallies to policymakers' participation in awareness-raising programmes make the day memorable. In accordance with international commitments and legal acts, and in order to uplift the accessibility and inclusion of persons with disabilities into the community, the Bangladesh government has taken initiatives through the National Action Plan as well as Education Policy 2010 of the Ministry of Education.

Regarding disability, the plan and policy focus on the overall development and improvement of social and educational inclusion of persons with disabilities. But it is disappointing that the development as well as educational programmes for these persons still remain under the Ministry of Social Welfare. It indicates that the educational issue of these persons is being considered as welfare or a charity rather than a development issue.

Bangladesh is a country with massive human resources, but most of them are extremely poor. The development of such a country fully depends on the best utilisation of its resources. But the persons with disabilities face stigma and prejudice and are confronted with significant barriers in realising their fundamental human rights. Though the Ministry of Education is responsible for the education of these people there are very few schools run by the government. Most of the schools are run by non-government organisations.

Special provisions for education of persons with disabilities are very costly, and beyond the financial capabilities of a densely populated and least developed country like Bangladesh. Hence, in order to re-affirm the vision of Education for All (EFA) as well as Millennium Development Goals (MDG), the government tries to ensure education by creating scope and opportunities for every citizen. The government has taken initiatives for reformation of the disability welfare act 2001, which is a very positive step. It is important to perceive and realise the situation of the individual beyond his/her disability and appreciate each person as an individual. Thus, persons with disabilities have the right to learn and enjoy their other basic rights with full opportunities in the society. Moreover, these persons have many unique strengths and specific talents in certain areas, such as communication, use of community resources, academic ability, personal safety, social skills, self-care, independent living, and health care.

In spite of poverty, lack of awareness and understanding, and lack of accessibility, social inclusion as a cross-cutting development issue remains an obstacle in the achievement of progress and development through the MDGs as well as other internationally agreed outcomes like EFA.

The International Day of Persons with Disabilities in 2012 is a day with lots of hope, inspiration, awareness and commitment. Thus, this celebration offers an opportunity to address the exclusion by focusing on encouraging accessibility and removing all types of barriers in society.

The writer is Assistant Professor and Chairman, Department of Special Education, Institute of Education and Research (IER), University of Dhaka.

## The Ashulia Disney combo

SAFWAN SHABAB

AS I pen this article I notice a piece in the *Wall Street Journal* detailing the recent fire disaster at the Ashulia garment factory. The title "Why Bangladesh Keeps Burning" catches my attention. In my experience of keeping a close tab on news from Dhaka, this one incident has been receiving relatively wide coverage -- and scrutiny -- from the US press. It is ironic this accident took place at about the same time as Black Friday in the US. The day after Thanksgiving, referred to as Black Friday, is the biggest sales event for shoppers when retailers mark down prices on every item from the 42 inch TVs to winter jackets. It is hard to miss the connection that like in every holiday season, this year as well a large number of retailers were stocking their shelves with clothing made in Bangladesh when the factory fire broke out in Dhaka twelve time zones away.

It is this consumer demand in the global markets for affordable clothing, ones which commercials here flaunt and Walmart and Sears put a hefty discount on, that creates the market which factories like Tazreen Fashion feed into. While a textbook example of an increasingly globalised marketplace, it is also a glaring evidence of a race to the bottom -- the lowest costs. Sadly, Bangladesh's low-skilled abundant labour has become the lowest cost denomination in this global equation.

It was notable that few US shoppers seemed unaware of what had happened in Ashulia last week. Despite recent activism amongst average Americans via social media, this was not one which caught people's attention outside the mainstream media. In the past few years, a generation of tech-savvy Americans has taken to Twitter and Instagram to learn, voice and mobilise around social causes -- from the election of Barack Obama to tracking Hurricane Sandy, from

campaigning against a warlord in Uganda to calling for calorie counts on food labels, everyone seems to have an opinion. Yet I noticed few on this blog roll who had tweeted about the Ashulia inferno or mentioned that Disney was making its Lightning McQueen sweatshirts at the same factory where a hundred plus workers perished. Amidst all the connectedness via iPhones and Droids, there is a definite disconnect between the consumer who wears that hoodie "Made in Bangladesh" and the realities of working life for Bangladeshis stitching away halfway around the world.

This lack of awareness -- you may call it ignorance -- is in stark contrast with the sheer magnitude of consumer demand in this market. The US is after all

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the top destination for Bangladesh's booming garments industry. Benefitting from abundant labour and significant investments over the last two decades, a massive manufacturing sector has built itself up to cater to the global markets. Policymakers laud this intersection as a classic example of a functional globalised economy where demand meets supply in its truest meaning. Bangladesh today is a garment powerhouse -- with \$18 billion a year in exports, the sector constitutes around 13% of the country's GDP.

As a producer, Bangladesh ranks second behind China and is widely expected to become the top player by virtue of its price competitiveness and capacity. More than three million workers are employed in the country's 4,500 garment factories,

most of them women. The sector has acted as an engine behind the economy's growth, providing much needed employment. Along with the home-grown microfinance industry, this sector might be Bangladesh's biggest homegrown commercial success story till date.

But with success, Bangladesh faces its own challenges. As the WSJ article rightly points out, the country has become overly dependent on a single sector to drive its growth. Unknowingly, Bangladesh's political economy might have become prey to its own wonder sector -- a relatively weak government and a powerful industry whose trajectory has a disproportionate influence on politics and policies.

On one hand, well-connected garment manufacturers from both parties sit in parliament and have secured preferential import duties and special economic zones for the industry. On the surface, this is no different from any growing industry in any country; however, in a local version of a "resource curse," Bangladesh might have stifled investments in other sectors while sacrificing labour wages and workplace safety. On the other hand, government policies are leading more members of a rapidly urbanising population into a single industry with poor wages and conditions while not supporting other industries which could generate jobs to absorb the large labour force.

The Ashulia fire should be a wake-up call for Dhaka on a few levels: beyond the obvious enforcement of fire-safety measures in facilities like those of Tazreen, policymakers need to recognise the pitfalls of relying on a single industry for the country's growth. Bangladesh needs to diversify its manufacturing base, enacting favourable market policies and attracting investments in other high growth areas, including technology and healthcare.

The writer is a freelance writer, raised in Dhaka and currently based in Chicago.