

Corruption, the killer in Savar: Thoughts for international response

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THE Savar tragedy caused by the collapse of the Rana Plaza near capital Dhaka has been, and will be, analysed and interpreted in many different ways. Cutting across anything else is that it is one of the worst possible examples of ill effects of corruption -- abuse of power for private gain.

We have known corruption is as a malaise that prevents development. It undermines democracy and deprives people of fundamental human rights. It erodes trust in leadership and democratic institutions. More important(ly), not only does corruption prevent access of the poor and disadvantaged to the whole range of basic services and entitlements like education, health, and nutrition and safety-net, the Savar tragedy tells the world that corruption kills innocent, honest, diligent and hardworking women and men striving to eke out a living in an extremely challenging context.

That it is about corruption is clear enough. Rana Plaza was allegedly constructed in an illegally occupied piece of land in collusion with the powerful from both sides of the political spectrum, supported by commission or omission by officials in the municipality, Rajuk and other authorities whose responsibility it was to ensure compliance to laws, regulations and codes relevant to the design, height, content and quality of construction and use of the building. There were gross violations a to z by power or transaction.

Question remains if and to what extent source of income behind such a huge property was a matter of interest to the tax authority. The UNO abused power to undermine security threats caused by the cracks, so did owners of garments factories who forced the workers to come to work. The reckoning can go on.

Meanwhile, official death toll has crossed 520 with hundreds missing; nobody will know the exact number. The fact is that the overwhelming majority of those killed and maimed are women garment workers who not only emerged as the catalyst of social change, but also lifeline of the economy. They have done so in spite of the failure of successive governments, laws, institutions and garments owners in particular, to accord due recognition of their contribution.

To be sure, compared to the patronage, privileges and even impunity granted over the years to factory owners represented by the BGMEA, precious little attention of the high and mighty has ever been drawn to the basic rights of workers -- right to union, workplace safety and security of life.

There are within the sector certainly some compliant business houses that could be good practice examples. But obsessed with quick profits, a larger section of the so-called employers have not only ignored the basic requirement of transparency in setting up terms of employment like basic minimum salaries and benefits and work place safety, they have also used their money-power to enjoy impunity blatantly violating laws, regulations and codes thanks to a vicious and apparently unbreakable collusion of elements in politics, business, administration and law enforcement.

This pernicious collusion is symbolised by the "monument of corruption" in the heart of the capital - the BGMEA headquarters built on an illegally occupied water body defying civil society outcry and even court orders. No wonder that the foundation stone of

this citadel of illegality was laid by one prime minister while it was inaugurated by another, symbolising an unabashed and endless mutual contest of gaining inches in the power base of political space.

This growing linkage of politics and business with plus 60% of members of the parliament having business as primary occupation against below 20 in the first post-independence parliament four decades ago, lies at the core of the policy capture by forces that have prevented strategic and concrete measures. Nothing more than a few eyewash efforts happened when deaths and destruction took place in the garment sector leading up to the Savar tragedy.

This is also the reason that blame game continues by both the leading political parties casting doubt if everyone responsible will be brought to justice even this time. No one can also guarantee that Rana Plaza would be the last in this series of killing, maiming and human tragedies.

For obvious reasons, the international community including the UN Secretary General, Pope Francis, ILO and many direct stakeholders in garments business like the US and EU have joined the uproar occurring in the country. Many have extended both short and long term support. The EU, for instance, has raised strong concern over labour conditions and declared

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"appropriate action" to encourage improvements in working conditions in Bangladeshi factories.

Coincidentally, the international response was preceded by the Universal Periodic Review of Bangladesh's human rights situation under the UN that took place in Geneva five days after the building collapsed. The session and consultations building up to it were almost captured by outpouring of sympathies and demands for action to prevent any such tragedies in the future. All these, combined with a possible hard look, if any, by those who hold business, political and enforcement power in Bangladesh may raise new hopes of positive change.

However, industry insiders are reportedly concerned that international response might include measures to affect Bangladeshi products' access to global markets, especially duty and quota free entry in EU countries. Therefore, this is also the time to look at the issue of workers' rights and safety in a constructive and responsible manner to ensure that any actions taken does not adversely affect the industry, which can only victimise the workers further.

Responsibility for such tragedies lies on weak law enforcement, corruption and a desperate game of making quick money. Everyone responsible must be brought to justice to prevent such tragedies in future

and ensure higher safety standards. However, nothing in the wake of such tragedies can justify any measure that could restrict access of Bangladeshi products to the EU, North American and other global markets. This will mean chopping off the head for headache, and lead to punishing the garment workers for no fault of them, over 85% of whom are women.

It is also time for the buyers of Bangladeshi products abroad -- individuals and companies -- to refrain from any shortsighted, irresponsible and cowardly course like turning away from this highly productive and profitable supplier with extremely dedicated, disciplined and active women workers.

At the core of the international community's concerns are workers' rights. But any action that may reduce access of Bangladeshi products to the global market will scarcely affect those who are responsible for it -- sections in business, politics, administration and law enforcement -- who have enough capacity to live with such eventuality. On the other hand, it is the workers who will be worst affected for lack of employment opportunity, and the common people who will suffer for its impact on the economy. The international actors have two possible ways of making constructive and positive contribution to change. First to use their economic and political leverage to work with the relevant authorities in Bangladesh to catalyse new legal and regulatory reforms and contribute to building institutional capacity for enforcement to effectively challenge impunity. Second, incentivise buyers and other business agents in their own countries to promote more business here while packaging such business deals in a manner that ensures higher safety standards and welfare of workers.

The lesson of Rana Plaza is not to scare business and investment away from Bangladesh, but to underscore the importance of conducting business with responsibility and integrity. The importing companies cannot shy away from their own role to ensure stricter compliance to safety standards in factories they conduct business with. Anything like playing safe and dumping business when tragedies occur will be cowardly and unsustainable even from a profitability point of view of buyers.

Nor have such companies have any reason to perceive themselves as helpless in the face of corruption and impunity of their business partners. Their concerns of violation of worker rights and safety issues have better ways of expression than punishing the workers by rendering them jobless. The importing companies can be closely involved in preventive measures, like ensuring strict compliance with safety and rights standards as part of their business deals. Like quality and design of a product, indicators of strict adherence to safety and security standards and labour rights can also be a part of profitable, responsible and sustainable business deal.

The Savar tragedy shows that profit from cheap garments comes at a cost which the global garment market players, especially buyers and Governments of the developed world have to share if they want people to be convinced that they practice what they preach -- rights of workers.

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SHIFTING IMAGES

Of mice and men



MILLIA ALI

IT'S April 28 -- four days after the catastrophic collapse of the Rana Plaza at Savar that housed several garment factories. It's pitch dark outside. What time is it? I don't know and it doesn't matter because time has stood still for me for the last few days.

Like most of the nation, I am glued to the television watching the rescue efforts at the wreckage... praying for all the unfortunate women and men trapped under the debris. One woman in particular has gripped the nation's attention. Garment worker Shaheena Akhter, who lies entombed in a dark hole fighting for survival. Rescuers have been battling heroically for 30 hours to pull her out of the mesh of jagged concrete and twisted steel. She is still holding on -- pleading, begging, a reporter tells us. I wait with bated breath -- any minute now.

Suddenly a fire breaks out inside the wreckage and hopes of rescuing Shaheena fade.... A member of the rescue team comes out of the dark tunnel of concrete jungle and breaks down in tears. I can watch no more. I switch off the TV and close my eyes. Sleep evades me.

My mind travels back to 1971. To the refugee camps, where I witnessed men and women perform acts of exceptional courage and sacrifice in the face of tremendous adversity. I was convinced then that the ordinary citizens of this country have great potential. The Savar garment factory tragedy has reinforced my faith in the resourcefulness and goodness of common people. The main thrust of the rescue effort came from the general masses who used shovels, pick axes and hammers to dig through the rubble of concrete and iron and saved 2,500 people. The staff at the nearby Enam Medical College Hospital worked round the clock to tend to the wounded. I salute them in recognition of how much they have given to their homeland.

But heroism is only half of the story of Savar. The other half is an ugly tale of greed, selfishness and a callous disregard for human life. The loss of lives in the Rana Plaza collapse was no "accident" -- it was willful and brutal murder, since the garment workers were coerced into the factory premises by the owners, despite prior warnings of major cracks in the pillars. We don't know how many lie dead in the ruins. 400 or 1,400? Does it matter? They were not just numbers. They were real people with dreams

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and aspirations, toiling to earn an honest living. A disaster of this magnitude cannot be bypassed without proper accountability. And much of the onus rests on the government, (present and past), that has failed to regulate building safety codes and enforce/introduce laws that protect underpaid laborers working in unsafe conditions. Even where appropriate laws exist, inspectors collude with powerful interests and turn a blind eye to violations. The rescue efforts showed that the authorities were inadequately equipped to handle the situation. So, why did we spurn international assistance that was offered immediately? Because our egos are too inflated to ask for help?

As for the garment manufacturers/factory owners, the "Ranas" (who are part of the garment mafia chain) and the BGMEA -- you are all culpable. The message is clearly written on the shattered walls of Rana Plaza and the charred ruins of Tazreen Garments. The men and women who help you earn millions are callously exploited by you to extract astronomical profits.

The BGMEA has the temerity to claim that the recent media coverage of the Savar tragedy has created an "image crisis" for the country? Perhaps its members believe that images are built by projecting the handful of filthy rich flashing their Birkin handbags and Frank Mueller watches, while the \$37/month salaried workers are hidden in the catacombs of sweatshops!

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As for me, next time I walk into Gap and pick up a pair of jeans "Made in Bangladesh," I will say a prayer for the worker whose emaciated fingers hemmed its seams. I will fondly remember Shaheena and her rescuers. True, there was no fairy tale ending for Shaheena since she perished under the wreckage and her rescuer Ejaz lies in a hospital bed fighting for his life. But her poignant story demonstrates all that is good in man -- valor, sacrifice and the indomitable human spirit of survival.

This is the "image" of Bangladesh I would like to promote to the world. A country where calamity makes heroes out of ordinary citizens!

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What we do today, will pay off tomorrow: the case for midwives

ARTHUR ERKEN

NOT so long ago, in Mymensingh, Sufia gave birth to her first child. She went into labour in her home, on the outskirts of the city, with her mother-in-law and a neighbour to support her. The labour took a long time and the family contacted the local health care facility to ask if they could check upon Sufia. They did not have time to attend to her but said everything was fine.

"Births take time" the person said without examining or checking Sufia or the baby. Sufia felt something was wrong, but nobody took her to the hospital. After two days of painful labour, she finally gave birth to a stillborn boy. The baby was perfect in every way, but did not survive the long birth.

Today, Sufia is not only mourning her lost son, but also knows that something went wrong in her body after being in labour for so long. These days, she cannot hold her urine and starts to smell bad. Sufia is 17 years old and has still a full life ahead of her, but is already traumatised by a lost child and genital injuries that might be permanent. The boy's life could have been saved and Sufia could have been spared from injuries. How?

Now, let's fast forward, say 10 years from now! In 2023, Bangladesh is hopefully a middle-income country by now, and our children and grandchildren will most probably look back and reflect on the revolutionary steps that were taken in 2012. You may ask what happened in 2012? Well, last year, Bangladesh launched the national midwifery education programme! Now why was this so revolutionary and ground breaking? For a start, midwives save lives! Our daughters and our granddaughters will most probably survive pregnancy and childbirths simply by having midwives by their side.

Fortunately, most pregnancies and births are completely normal and end well; more precisely 85% women go through a pregnancy and give birth without complications. It is the remaining 15% of the women we should be particularly concerned about. But since we can only to a certain extent identify who will have complications during pregnancy or childbirth, all pregnant women will need a professional by

their side when going through pregnancy and giving birth.

In Bangladesh, nearly half a million women will be at risk every year while pregnant and giving birth. Today, about two million women deliver their children without any skilled professionals to support and save their lives if there are complications (BDHS 2011). Together with a functioning referral system and strong collaboration within the healthcare system, midwives have the required knowledge and skills to save these women.

Moreover, women have a right to a professional trained healthcare provider to support and partner with her, at every stage of maternity.

Bangladesh has made a remarkable progress in decreasing maternal mortality to 194/100,000 live births and must be congratulated for the great efforts. However, the remaining decline in the maternal mortality ratio will require much more efforts and work. In many countries, such as Sweden and Indonesia, the success of eliminating maternal mortality is strongly linked to educating and deploying midwives in the healthcare system and Bangladesh has started the long but promising journey to make this happen.

That is why 2012 was perhaps a historical year, with the introduction of the national 3-year Direct Entry Midwifery Programme in public institutes. And this year the programme also started in private institutions. The midwifery programme is based on international standards and took several years to develop in collaboration with government, international organizations and development partners.

There will be many adjustments and changes needed in the years to come, but the most important thing is that young women who have passed the Higher Secondary Certificate will have the chance to become a professional maternal healthcare provider. When the government opened the applications of 525 seats in the midwifery programme, over 7,500 eligible women applied. This proves that there is a huge interest among young women in Bangladesh to be trained as a midwife.

In that respect, we should hail the bold and courageous decision makers and officials who were part of the launching of the midwifery programme in

Bangladesh in 2012. Numerous civil surgeons, nursing institutes and college principals will be remembered for their struggle in developing a solid midwifery faculty to teach the students in the essential midwifery skills and competencies.

In the 10 to 20 years ahead, hopefully every woman has a midwife by her side from early adolescence to when she enters menopause. Every time a young woman needs family planning, when she gets pregnant, wherever she decides to give birth, after her delivery and many other occasions in her reproductive life, there will be a professional midwife to counsel and support her. Of course, medical doctors and nurses are there too, but only when their expertise is needed and in collaboration with the midwife.

If this collaboration succeeds, the chances are very good that many women and children's lives will be saved. And that is our goal: that no woman dies when giving life! So, investing in midwives is investing in the overall development of a nation.

The process of developing professional midwives, currently underway in Bangladesh, will be documented and recognised over and over again. Lessons will be learned, stories will be told and experiences will be shared with other countries. Bangladesh is indeed brave, and the commitment made in 2010 to educate and deploy midwives in the healthcare system will affect many women and families for decades to come.

The government's commitment to educate and post four midwives in every Upazila Health Complex to cover 24/7 services by 2015 is a very positive step forward to provide women a continuum of maternal health care.

Creating the post of the midwifery is currently the most urgent step forward which needs to be taken immediately, not to lose the competence of the already 534 educated midwives.

The efforts, commitment and work done now may not directly save the lives of women giving birth today, but will affect the lives of our daughters and granddaughters in future. In other words, what we do today, will pay off for the Sufia's of tomorrow!

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