

# Vertical farming takes shape

FOUNDER EDITOR  
LATE S. M. ALI

## Most married women face abuse

*Our patriarchal mindset must be discarded*

AROUND 80 percent of married women/girls have been abused by their husbands at least once in their lifetime. This horrible piece of data has come from none other than a government survey, namely the Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics. Although hardly surprising in a country where violence against women makes the news every single day, that the rate of abuse against married women would be so high, is appalling.

According to the report, these women/girls face all kinds of violence – physical, sexual, economic and emotional. Husbands are controlling and in most cases married women keep their trauma hidden. Only 2.6 percent of the victims actually seek legal support. Social stigma, further violence from the husband, concern for family honour, ensure this silence.

Unsurprisingly, the report has found that rural women are more likely to face such abuse though even in urban areas the rate is quite high – around 54.4 percent.

These statistics point out that despite stringent laws against violence against women, male chauvinism is part of our culture and our age-old stereotypical perceptions regarding women have not changed. Wife beating has always been seen as a personal matter in our society, even our legal system is a party to that. In many occasions not only does society condone wife beating, it even encourages it as a way to keep women 'under control'.

A drastic change is therefore in order – a change in the way society as a whole treats its female members. Child marriage that legitimises sexual abuse of minors, must be stopped immediately. We need more legal aid and counselling services, shelters and income generating programmes for women who want to get out of abusive marriages because of fear or financial insecurity. It is up to us as a society to change this shameful scenario.

## Mobile application for accident victims

*Help such private initiatives*

WE laud the efforts of CritcaLink which has developed a mobile application that sends alert to volunteers so that they can respond when a disaster strikes. It is indeed heartening to note that the organisation has built the infrastructure necessary to carry out the task by training as many as 3,000 individuals in emergency medical aid, of whom 380 people it has certified. We believe that the initiative, launched by a US and a Bangladeshi citizen can become a lifeline for the victims of road accidents, the number of which has lately seen a marked rise. Also, it is encouraging that private individuals are coming up with such unique, life-saving enterprises, which the state, with its formidable infrastructural advantage, should have initiated on its own.

It is no less than shocking that Bangladesh does not have a dedicated helpline for accident victims, especially because 21,000 die in the country every year, of them over 80 percent meet their tragic end on the way to the hospital. A dearth of ambulance and the spectre of gridlock in the street that prevents speedy evacuation are primarily to be blamed for these avoidable deaths. In this line, the role of CriticalLink is crucial as it provides emergency medical aid in situ.

We must not forget that fighting road accident is a continuous, dynamic process and the government should play its due role in arresting its rise. We urge the government to actively help CriticalLink and other agents of change who endeavour to bring in succour to the poor and helpless. Also it is high time to establish a telephone helpline and bring the cities under the observation of closed-circuit TV camera so that accidents, criminal activities and other such emergencies can be monitored and responded to.

## LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

letters@thedailystar.net

### Improving education facilities

The DS published an article commending the Primary Education Officer of Kulaura, District Moulovibazar.

We should salute and appreciate the noble job being done by Kulaura Upazila Primary Education officer Mr. Shariful Islam for imparting basic education to our children and helping them move forward in the world. Drawing the example of the Education Officer the concerned Ministry needs to allocate adequate financial support to each school in all districts to buy educational tools like hanging maps, globes and other basic scientific materials.

The Chairmen of the Union Parishad/guardians of the concerned locations need to play a combined role to encourage students and teachers, and help them overcome institutional obstacles.  
Siraj Islam, On Email

### This is not the way for development

We are disappointed in the Chhatra League activists who obstructed the people's protest of the Rampal Power Plant. Even the cycle procession of protesters moving towards Doel Chattar was stopped using water cannons.

This movement is not a political one - people are trying to save their country from disaster. We do not want destruction in the name of development, the government must understand that.  
Nur Jahan, Chittagong

### NO FRILLS



SYED MANSUR HASHIM

WE can certainly do more to reduce food wastage in our supply chains. It is not just Bangladesh where a lot of the produce goes to waste due to inefficient marketing and distribution channels; it is estimated that about half of all perishables in countries like Indonesia, Vietnam, Cambodia and Thailand go to waste before they reach retail markets. According to the World Bank, as much as 25 percent to 33 percent of all food produced in the world is wasted, which is equivalent to 1 billion metric tons. So, while all the focus and hype around food security seems to revolve around greater productivity, why aren't policymakers concentrating more on preserving the food already produced, which is then allowed to go to waste? This issue has been on the cards for many years and unfortunately, we have not seen much in terms of concrete policy interventions to bring about qualitative change in policy that would help farmers get their produce to markets faster.

While the world debates on and on about food security, technology is lending a hand to turn things around. Urban, concrete structures are being transformed into farms. For instance, in Newark (New Jersey, USA), a 69,000ft<sup>2</sup> former steel factory has been converted into the world's largest urban farm. Once completed, it will grow anywhere up to 2 million pounds of kale, arugula and romaine lettuce annually. Technology is driving this new nascent sector but the implications are obvious. Climate-induced changes threatening to alter the topography of Asian farmlands in the decades to come and weather becoming more and more erratic with more droughts, floods, typhoons, etc. it is time to think outside the box. If we are to end 'global hunger' (one of the UN's 17 Sustainable Development Goals) over the next 15 years, urban farming will have to take centre-stage along with food wastage to meet the hungry mouths of the future.

Japan, a tech-driven nation, has introduced the world's first indoor farm. The setting is a 25,000ft<sup>2</sup> abandoned semiconductor factory in Miyagi province. The technology comes from an American company that uses tall towers

of LED-light trays, which it is claimed, consumes 95 percent less water to grow green produce than it would ordinarily take (i.e. if they were grown traditionally in fields) because the company claims to use mist instead of water to grow plants. If the technology is as good as claimed, it can yield 75 times more crops without the use of pesticides. Media reports have stated that the indoor farm produces 10,000 heads of lettuce daily which makes this farm 100 times more efficient than a comparable traditional farm.

The question of vertical and/or

suffers from salinity that renders the land useless. And it is in this setting that vertical gardening is taking root among hundreds of villagers with the use of plastic sacks, giant containers made of plastic sheets and bamboo, etc." WorldFish Centre, a non-government organisation working with villagers believes that vertical gardens work in Bangladesh because we suffer from heavy monsoon that dilutes the salt in soil. And from July to October, the soil is inundated with 1.5 metres of rain due to the heavy rains. The flushed soil

China, India and Nigeria. Bangladesh too is experiencing rapid urbanisation with roughly a tenth of the population living in the capital city Dhaka.

Vertical farming, as we are seeing in more advanced economies, is making inroads into agriculture. The higher start-up costs because infrastructure has to be bought or leased and costs associated with training up of personnel and maintenance of infrastructure begs the question whether this can be successfully replicated in economies such as ours. But one should remember that as the



Vertical farms evolve to end hunger.

PHOTO: YAHOO

indoor farming is no longer confined to the realm of science fiction but science fact. The benefits of vertical farming are already being reaped by Bangladesh farmers in certain areas. According to a report published by the *Voice of America* in February, 2015, "In Chandpur village in southwest Bangladesh, lush vines sprouting pumpkins and gourds cover the tin roofs of small homes. This bounty sprouts from an unlikely source: large plastic sacks on the ground and other containers. In the southwest of the country, most of the coastal belt

is collected by villagers in the post-rainy season which is then put into containers to grow vegetables. While the above scenario illustrates what is possible in rural areas, can we ignore the urbanisation trends globally? In 2008, we were confronted with the news that more than half the world population was living in urban areas. Indeed, projections point to the fact that two out of every three people will be living in an urban setting by 2050, and 40 percent of the projected urban growth between now and then will take place in countries like

technology matures, costs should come down. At the end of the day, it is all about boosting food production and with more and more people moving to the cities, every initiative to enhance urban food security becomes imperative to policymakers. New technology initiatives being undertaken elsewhere should be looked into by our policymakers and city planners to make the best use of available urban space for productive uses.

The writer is Assistant Editor, *The Daily Star*.

# 'BREXIT' means uncertainty

SELINA MOHSIN

ON June 23, the UK electorate surprised itself by voting 52 percent: 48 percent to leave the EU, after 40 years of membership. Warnings of experts of economic damage had been defeated by populist emotion.

The referendum revealed a bitter resentment of metropolitan elites equipped with education, wealth and connections to make them better able to adapt and thrive in an era of globalisation and technological change. Only London, some prosperous regional cities, Scotland and Northern Ireland voted to 'remain' in the EU. Scotland preferred rule from Brussels to rule from Westminster, even after devolution of powers to their own parliamentary assembly.

Prime Minister Cameron resigned and his successor, Theresa May, the former Home Secretary, promptly sacked the Chancellor of the Exchequer, George Osborne. Mrs. May had quietly supported the 'remain' camp but now gave three prominent persons 'leavers', who voted to leave the EU responsibility for devising a road map out of the EU. The Governor of the Bank of England lowered interest rates to try to cushion the expected economic shock. The pound sterling dropped 12 percent and stock markets across the world reacted badly to the new uncertainty: what would Brexit mean, for the UK and for the already shaky EU?

Two and a half months later, the UK markets have recovered. Consumers have realised that Britain is still in the EU for at least two years. They have continued to spend and exports have taken advantage of the sterling's fall. The 'leavers' have taken this as evidence that the Cameron government's warnings of economic damage were exaggerated. They claim new trading opportunities will open across the world once the UK is free of the 'burdens' of EU's bureaucratic regulation. Nigel Lawson, Chancellor under Mrs. Thatcher, calls for a completion of her 1980s economic revolution through deregulation.

The 'remainers' acknowledge that the economy has recovered from the initial shock better than some expected. They point out that leaving the EU will take years of negotiation, even after Britain has formally started the process by invoking Article 50 of the Lisbon treaty. They warn that the adverse economic consequences of Brexit will gradually emerge. The devaluation of the sterling is likely to raise import prices. Moreover, uncertainty as to the form Brexit might take, particularly as regards to the degree of UK continued access to the EU single market and customs union of 450 million people is likely to hit both domestic and foreign investment. Negotiation regarding the terms and conditions of such access could well be difficult and could only fully begin after the transitional terms of UK withdrawal had been agreed.

The 'leavers' say that Britain should accept trading on World Trade Organisation (WTO)

terms, including tariffs. The 'remainers' point out that even this would need a decade of negotiating with all WTO members. President Obama and Japanese Prime Minister Abe have both issued their own warnings.

The UK has grown accustomed to foreign firms and banks setting up in Britain, especially in London, as a convenient base not only for investment in the domestic market but for operations throughout the EU. Strong inflows of foreign capital have been important in helping to sustain the UK's capital account deficit. The 'City' is the financial centre and provides a key element of UK government revenues. It has formidable strengths, but could still be weakened if foreign banks lose EU 'passporting' rights and cease to use the 'City' as a base for European operations.

At the Hangzhou G20 summit meeting and the following UN General Assembly, Prime Minister May stressed that Britain intends to cooperate fully with the EU and

When Parliament resumed after a summer break, the trio of new 'leavers' ministers still projected confidence in a bright future, but it was clear that as yet they still had no agreed strategy to achieve it. Theresa May had already ruled out the demand for a snap election or a fresh referendum by the Liberal Democrat party and by a petition with four million signatures. She might come to regret these decisions. She inherited only a thin Conservative majority. Recent opinion polls suggest that a quick election, to take advantage of the sharp divisions of her Labour party opponents under left winger Jeremy Corbyn, might have given her a personal mandate and a large enough majority to defy any rebellion by the firmly euro-sceptic section of her own party. As things are, Brexit's future shape remains an uncertainty. Much must depend upon the French and German elections due next year.

Brexit poses an unwelcome challenge for the EU. It adds to existing problems of aging



ILLUSTRATION: THE MILLENIUM

maintain the UK's international role in the UNSC and NATO. In neither speech did she set out a Brexit strategy.

She had, however, already alarmed 'leavers' by ruling out their favoured 'points system' to control immigration and by not ruling out acceptance of some modified form of EU 'free movement' of labour, if that could be agreed. Even this could be difficult, given that 'free movement' is a fundamental principle for the EU and a key demand by East European countries like Poland. She is also aware from her years as Home Secretary how much the NHS and sectors of the UK economy rely on immigrant workers and on international scientific collaboration. The signs so far are that, caught between the key conflicting issues of immigration and access to the single market, her priority may eventually be to focus on trying for a bespoke 'Brexit Light' deal, retaining maximum access to the single market.

populations, sluggish economies, migrant pressures, Russian covert threats and rising populist nationalism. Although Britain remains a full EU member for at least two years, its influence on European policies and the EU's future has now sharply diminished. Will the EU now evolve towards a looser 'Common Partnership' allowing for much more varied national 'subsidiarity' relations? Or might it go the other way, towards a tighter banking regime and 'ever tighter union', or perhaps even a European army? Mrs. Merkel, President Hollande and Prime Minister Renzi met to discuss a way forward but the Bratislava summit of the 27 (without the UK) achieved little. All face their own political difficulties, and despite the common wish for EU unity, big regional divides were also apparent. For Europe, as for the UK, the times are difficult and the future murky.

The writer is a former ambassador.

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