

Calculated cruelty over dowry



Sarah Anjum Bari

THE fact that 13 women have been killed and 17 physically abused over dowry in Bangladesh in January and February of 2017 does little to rattle us. Neither do the figures of 107 deaths, five suicides, and 94 physical abuse victims in all of 2016. These are, alas, just numbers that we forget soon after reading them online. But when you hear of a woman who, last week, was chained to a bed and beaten up with sticks and hot iron rods, almost forced to swallow poison, and salt and chilli powder rubbed on her wounds, it forces your eyes open to the horror thousands of women have faced and continue to do so.

April 25, and having returned without the additional dowry, she faced the worst form of physical abuse imaginable. She was fortunately rescued by her parents and taken to the hospital with severe bruises and burns all over her body.

Firstly, if this marriage had taken place 16 years ago in around 2001, under the Dowry Prohibition Act 1980 that was applicable at the time, Badal Mridha would be punishable by an imprisonment of up to five years, or a fine, or both. Given that dowry-related torture is still a very stubborn part of our present, however, it's no surprise that Badal was able to demand dowry without any repercussions nearly a decade ago. But the beginning of this year saw the establishment of the Dowry Prohibition Act 2017. Under this law, anyone who causes critical injuries to a woman over dowry will face 12 years' imprisonment, along with an additional fine. Given that Badal Mridha has already been arrested after a case was filed against him on Friday, we hope that he and his family are dealt with the highest form of punishment for the horrors that they unleashed on Taslima.

But the question remains – will they comprehend the magnitude of their crimes even if they are punished? Will the punishment simply push them to regret their own fate at getting caught, or will they truly understand why their actions were wrong? If they were capable of that thought process, wouldn't they have refrained from hurting Taslima in the first place?

The news reports available so far highlight not only the incident, but also the nature of the incident that took place. Taslima wasn't tormented in one brief, impulsive moment of fury. She was abused over a long



SOURCE: BRAKINGNEWSBD.WORDPRESS.COM

period of time – almost the entire length of her marriage from what has been reported. And on the night of the final incident, Badal Mridha went to the trouble of preparing his weapons by dousing them in fire and tortured his wife through a series of horrifying acts that left stamps of trauma and cruelty all over her body. It takes an extremely sadistic streak to cause this much pain to a person.

This brings back the same questions that were raised when the Dowry Prohibition Act 2017 was passed earlier this year. It isn't enough

to simply pass laws prohibiting such cruelty. Neither is it enough to enforce those laws once the crimes have been committed (although that is crucial). We must be in a position to prevent these crimes in the first place. We must shatter the sense of self-entitlement that allows husbands and in-laws to demand payment for marriage, and to inflict wounds – physical or mental – on their spouses when their demands aren't met. We must cement the notion of women's rights, and *human rights*, into the minds of those who still believe in

the legitimacy of dowry and the superiority of husbands over wives. Girls and women must be made to understand that it is unacceptable when their husbands hit them and that they have every right to revolt against it. They must be informed of the laws and resources that are in place to protect them when they need help. The duty of informing them falls on the media as much as it does on the government.

Educational reform and social awareness must be strengthened and taken to the doorsteps of more and

more people across the country, particularly in villages and low-income urban societies where archaic patriarchal cultures are practised the most. These are weapons that, had they been used effectively, might have stopped Taslima's parents from agreeing to pay a dowry for their daughter's marriage. It might even have stopped them from marrying Taslima into such a household. Most importantly, it might have discouraged Taslima from returning to her husband after every episode of torture that she experienced.

This incident is likely to leave a trail of repercussions. How long will it take until Taslima recovers from the mental trauma? Will she receive psychological help, and even financial help, to be able to move on from this marriage? Will she be protected from the social prejudice that women of broken marriages have to face in a resiliently backward society? And what impacts will these events leave on the minds of her children? Will her son, who it seems was the one who helped rescue Taslima through a phone call from Dhaka, grow up to reject his father's ideologies?

We can hope that the answer to all of the above is "yes". Reality, however, often falls far short of what should ideally happen.

We can hope that the culprits of this crime are served with due punishment under the purview of the law. But the responsibility of tackling this culture of dowry and domestic abuse falls upon the society – made up of each individual person who has the power to empower girls, to raise better men, and to speak out in the loudest of voices against injustice in any shape or form.

The writer is a member of the Editorial team, *The Daily Star*.

PROJECT ■ SYNDICATE

A false spring at the spring meetings?

Carmen REINHART and Vincent REINHART

EVERY spring, international bureaucrats flock to Washington, DC, as reliably as swallows to Capistrano, for the annual meetings of the International Monetary Fund and the World Bank, where they exchange information about their local economies and policy prospects. Because these officials attend multiple events over the course of the week, an echo chamber develops, from which a general perception of the state of the global economy emerges. Policymaking around the world is then influenced by that perception. This time round, the sense was positive. According to IMF staff, as reported in their *World Economic Outlook*, real GDP should expand by about 2 percent in advanced economies this year and next. This will pull the unemployment rate below 6 percent, not much different from its level before the 2008 financial crisis. Deflation or unwelcome disinflation is now seen only in the rearview mirror, as consumer price inflation settles around 2 percent, the goal of most major central banks.

But, as any resident of New England knows, April showers do not always bring May flowers; sometimes they bring only more and colder showers. Not to rain on officials' parade, but we fear that they are taking too much comfort in the stabilisation of economic conditions. Beneath the headline numbers, there is little evidence that underlying problems have been resolved.

It wouldn't be the first time. The post-1945 record includes two prior "lost decades" in which economies struggling to recover from severe financial crises – including about a dozen countries in Latin America from 1982 to 1992, and Japan from 1992 to 2007 – underperformed their own trend growth and that of their peers.

As bleak as this history seems, annual real GDP growth *per capita* was positive in 60 percent and 75 percent of those years, respectively, in Latin America and Japan. Indeed, real GDP *per capita* expanded by more than 2 percent in at least a quarter of those years. That is, these countries glimpsed rays of sunshine through what turned out in retrospect to be a mostly solid cloud cover. Acceleration in economic activity may stir hope in officialdom, but levels matter, too. In Europe, real growth GDP has been only barely positive, on average, since the financial crisis, and its level in 2016 was about 20 percent below that predicted by the trend over the ten years up to 2007. This ranks as the slowest recovery from a severe financial crisis in two centuries. And aggregation hides a multitude of problems: Greece and Italy, for example, will not regain their pre-crisis level of real GDP *per capita* within the *World Economic Outlook's* forecast period, which stretches to 2022.

Yes, post-crisis spending headwinds are an important impediment to growth, partly owing to their persistence. But central to economic performance over this period is stagnating growth in potential output. According to the

IMF, growth in the advanced economies' real potential GDP – think of this as the underlying trend for aggregate supply – has fallen by half this century, from 2.71 percent in 2001 to as low as 1.28 percent just a few years ago. The picture is bleaker in the US, where, according to the Congressional Budget Office the amplitude of the swing is double, from about 4 percent to 1.5 percent. But all of the G7 economies share this phenomenon, because their aging populations are growing more slowly, withdrawing from the labour market, and adding little extra output per additional hour worked.

Whether productivity, or output per hour, will continue to languish is hard to predict. But data are data, and they show quite clearly that productivity growth has been languid for some time.

The growth of potential output is not just an economist's abstraction. If, as seems to be the case, the expected path of income turns south, we will have fewer future resources to meet our needs. To the extent that we have consumed and borrowed now in anticipation of higher income, disappointment is in store.

There certainly is scope for disappointment in advanced economies, considering that gross general government debt is hovering around 106 percent of nominal GDP and fiscal deficits are stretching beyond the forecast horizon. The budget math only gets harder as central banks normalise monetary policy, even if interest rates do not return completely to their pre-crisis levels. In economies with a recent record of fiscal restraint, including Australia, Canada, and New Zealand,

the private sector has been borrowing hand over fist. In times of distress, private-sector mistakes often become public-sector obligations.

The machinery of representative government works best when it is used to apportion a growing economic pie. For example, when the US economy was experiencing 4 percent trend growth, real GDP could

be expected to double in 18 years, comforting parents about their children's economic future. At the current trend of 1.5 percent growth, the period needed to double GDP stretches to 48 years, darkening the economic prospects of the grandchildren. In those circumstances, will elected officials make the hard decisions needed to

get from economic stabilisation to sustained recovery?

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QUOTABLE Quote

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