

# Madrassahs: The invisible link in achieving equity

## Export to US down nearly 5 percent

### Increase cargo handling efficiency

SHIPMENT to Bangladesh's single largest export destination is down by 4.93 percent in the first ten months of the current fiscal. Bangladeshi products are facing stiff competition from countries like Vietnam, Turkey, China and India – none of whom have to pay the 15.62 percent duty that we do. Hence in terms of price competitiveness, our producers are losing the game. The fact that the Bangladesh Taka is riding strong against the dollar is not helping the situation and while calls have been made to devalue the currency, the biggest problem we are facing has everything to do with our ineffective cargo handling, both sea and air.

In addition, the long lead times involved in shipment of raw materials inbound and finished products outbound at Hazrat Shahjalal Airport and Chittagong port are causing Bangladesh to fall behind Vietnam and China. The RMG export market to the US was worth around USD 537.6 million in January and has slipped down to USD 422.7 million in April of this year.

When it comes to RMG, Bangladesh unfortunately lags behind its biggest competitors since 40 percent of fabrics need to be imported due to the inability of local industry to meet needs on time. Gearing up local yarn makers to become more efficient is a long term affair. But surely we can do something to increase the efficiency of the airport and Chittagong port? These problems need to be settled quickly if we do not want competing countries to pick up Bangladeshi orders due to our inefficient handling of cargo.

## Waterlogged Dhaka streets

### Find a permanent solution

A collage of photographs published in this newspaper yesterday speaks of the continuous sufferings the city-dwellers have to go through as major thoroughfares of the city get inundated after a few hours of rain. And every time after a little shower, the city's traffic system totally collapses.

Waterlogging in Dhaka has become a common problem during monsoon. Rainwater is carried through natural canals and large concrete pipes to flood plains and rivers, but as most of the canals have been grabbed by the encroachers or clogged with solid wastes, the city streets are submerged even after a little rain. Moreover, according to experts, the city's storm-water drainage system is inadequate and is only capable of dealing with 20mm of rainfall and the streets get waterlogged if the rainfall exceeds 40mm. So, Dhaka needs a complete drainage network in which the canals, water retention areas, flood plains and rivers would collect, carry and retain rainwater and will be connected with each other.

According to the Flood Action Plan and DAP, the city should have 5,523 acres of conserved water retention areas, 20,093 acres of canals and rivers, and 74,598 acres of flood flow zones. But according to experts, most of these wetlands have been filled up.

Immediate action needs to be taken to reclaim the lost floodplains and canals, otherwise the situation will keep worsening. It is the duty of the city authorities to clean up the clogged drains and canals and rescue the water bodies inside the city from the land grabbers. The Dhaka City Corporations and Dhaka Wasa have to do their development works in coordination with each other. But what is most important is the implementation of the Dhaka's Detailed Area Plan (DAP) if we want a permanent solution to this problem.

SYEDA SHAGUFE HOSSAIN

SINCE the World Conference on Women in Mexico in 1975, Bangladesh has been at the forefront among the least-developed countries (LDCs) in addressing gender disparities. The country's achievements in education and gender parity in education, has also been remarkable. However, despite its success in achieving gender parity in many areas, some sections of the population have been left behind. One such section is female students in madrassah schools.

Arguably, much of the frequently cited increase in enrolment rate and gender parity in education can be accounted for by a rise and recent reform in the madrassah sector. A study by Dr. Niaz Asadullah, Professor of Development Economics in the Faculty of Economics at Malaya University, found that nearly half of the student population in these madrassahs today is female. Musammad Badrunnesha, Echidna Global Scholar and Christina Kwauk, Postdoctoral Fellow — Global Economy and Development, Centre for Universal Education, reported in a study that madrassahs provide education to over 1.5 million girls in Bangladesh. Despite accounting for a large percentage of the student population, female students graduating from this medium of education are seen to frequently disappear from the workforce. In fact, whatever research exists indicate that the majority of girls enrolled in the system will not transition to university or the workforce.

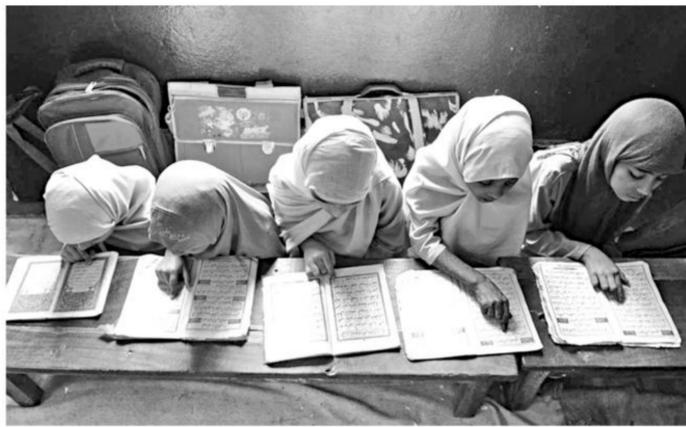
One may be curious as to why this sector has fallen behind in comparison to the rest of the nation. There are several reasons, some of which are historical. During the language movement in 1952, madrassahs were placed in an awkward position because of a strong emphasis on Urdu in the curriculum before 1971. After the country's liberation, some madrassahs continued their curriculum in Urdu and some did not. However, the sector has often been seen as a ground for breeding

anti-nationalist and anti-state sentiments amongst students. The international community has also regarded madrassahs as the breeding ground for terrorism, based on the fundamentalist ideologies that they are assumed to promote by virtue of their religious orientation.

On the other hand, madrassahs themselves have also resisted external interventions from NGOs. When NGOs first started operating in Bangladesh, they were often allegedly formed as part of Christian missionary organisations and

time develop proficiency of the Quran and Hadith.

For those communities where religious schooling is the only socially acceptable form of education for adolescent girls, parents are reluctant to send their daughters to secular schools despite the provision of cash or food subsidies. By virtue of observing Islamic religious teachings — for example, about girls and boys occupying separate spaces — madrassahs help allay fears and concerns of many parents about protecting the honour of their daughters while in school.



undertook charitable activities in underdeveloped areas in order to convert people to Christianity. So, as a result of being perceived as having evangelical agendas, NGOs were seen by madrassahs as existential threats.

Despite madrassah's complicated relationship with the state and the international community, madrassahs have been far from irrelevant. Of the two kinds of madrassahs, i.e. alia and qawmi, alia madrassahs are becoming more relevant among parents who wish for their children to obtain marketable skills but at the same

For religiously minded parents, alia madrassahs offering both secular and religious education provide a comforting response to the social influence of a rapidly globalising world.

Parents from various socio-economic strata are turning away from "regular" state schools to madrassahs to help preserve the social values of society, and they are choosing to send their daughters to madrassahs with the belief that madrassahs are safer for girls. Studies suggest that marriage-related motivations also influence parental choice of schooling for girls since

it is perceived that madrassah education instils traditional values that make their daughters more eligible in the marriage market. Under the circumstances, alia madrassahs have become the preferred form of schooling for the more religiously minded communities in the country providing education opportunity to over 1.5 million girls in Bangladesh.

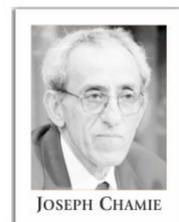
However, the Madrassah Education Board of Bangladesh reports on average, 33 percent fewer girls sit for their grade 10 examinations than on the grade 8 examinations. By the time they sit for their grade 12 examinations, 79 percent of girls from the original cohort have disappeared from school. Furthermore, only a small percentage of girls attending madrassahs will enter the labour market. While it may be convenient to take the stance that madrassahs should be replaced with secular schools, or left to themselves, madrassahs will simply become irrelevant as a result of outdated curriculum and schools of thought; current trends do not indicate that the medium will be replaced with secular schooling any time soon. In such a case then, at least explore, if not accommodate for the sector, comprising of such large numbers.

Real progress in society is achieved only through inclusion. The lack of information about the sector other than politicised information combined with the guarded nature within the community leads to misconceptions or non-conceptions, further breeding mistrust and in turn leading to the female sector of the population becoming one of the most marginalised communities of the country. Therefore, there is a need for both government and non-government bodies to design interventions that can successfully reach and cater to this population so that equity is achieved.

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## INTER PRESS SERVICE

# Overfed and underfed: global food extremes



GLOBAL food extremes of chronic undernourishment and obesity have brought about a bipolar world of hundreds of millions of underfed and

overfed people. Of the world's population of 7.5 billion, the proportions suffering from chronic undernourishment and those afflicted by obesity are similar: approximately 11 percent or together about 1.6 billion people. However, as with most global averages, the levels of both chronic undernourishment and obesity vary enormously among regions and across and within countries.

Various indicators may be used to determine the levels of chronic undernourishment, including caloric intake, poverty, mortality/morbidity, weight and height measurements, child wasting and child stunting, as well as, composite indexes. In this analysis, the focus is on undernourishment, defined as a person not being able to acquire enough food to meet the daily minimum dietary energy requirements over a period of one year.

Almost all of the chronically undernourished, more than 800 million people, live in developing countries, primarily in Africa and Asia. The remainder of the chronically undernourished, about 15 million people, reside in developed countries.

The populations of some 40 countries are facing serious food shortages. In a dozen of those countries, including Haiti, Zambia, Central African Republic, Namibia, North Korea and Chad, no less than one-third of the population are suffering from undernourishment.

Levels of undernourishment can also vary greatly within countries. For example, while the undernourished proportion in Nigeria is reported to be comparatively low among developing countries (about 7 percent) much of the population residing in its north-eastern region is at risk of famine.

India and China also have relatively low proportions of undernourished people: 15 percent and 9 percent, respectively. However, due to their very large populations, these two Asian countries account for a large share of the world's undernourished population: about 40 percent or 330 million people. Other countries having tens of millions of undernourished people include Bangladesh, Ethiopia, Indonesia, Pakistan, the Philippines and Tanzania.

In four countries — Nigeria, Somalia, South Sudan and Yemen — the shortages of food have become extreme with more than 20 million people facing starvation and famine. In addition, the populations of countries with insufficient data on undernourishment including Burundi, Democratic Republic of Congo, Libya, Sudan and Syria are believed to be facing serious food shortages.

More recently, crisis-stricken Venezuela is also experiencing widespread food shortages. With skyrocketing food prices, approximately 90 percent of the Venezuelans are reported not able to afford to buy enough food and close to three-fourths of them are estimated to have lost weight during the last year.

At the other extreme of food consumption is obesity. In general, obesity is defined as excessive fat accumulation that presents a risk to one's health. A common population measure of obesity is the body mass index (BMI), which is a person's weight (in kilograms) divided by the square of his or her height (in meters). A score of 30 or more is in most instances considered obese.

Close to 11 percent of the world's population, or approximately 780 million people, is considered obese. High rates of obesity, typically more than 25 percent of

obese people aged 15 years and over is the United States, at approximately 100 million. In second and third places are China (80 million) and India (50 million). Together those three countries account for 30 percent of the world's obese population aged 15 years and over.

As is the case with chronic undernourishment, obesity rates within countries vary considerably by gender, region, income and social group. In most countries, including Brazil, China, India, Indonesia, Mexico, Russia, Samoa, Saudi Arabia, South Africa, Turkey and the United States, women have markedly higher rates of obesity than men. Globally, approximately one in ten men and one in seven women are obese.

Also, among major social groups, such as in the United States, obesity rates can vary significantly. The highest obesity rate in the US is among black Americans (48

than in older adolescents.

Childhood obesity is considered one of the most serious public health challenges as it puts those children at greater risk of type 2 diabetes, asthma, musculoskeletal problems and future cardiovascular disease, as well as school absence, psychological difficulties and social isolation. To effectively address childhood obesity, some argue that obesity must be considered a disease.

The two food extremes — chronic undernourishment and obesity — are worldwide challenges, impacting the well being of more than one-fifth of humanity. Widespread chronic undernourishment, especially in Africa and Asia, has resulted in increased levels of misery, child wasting/stunting, morbidity and premature mortality. Many have concluded that the current food shortages encompassing approximately one billion people constitute the largest humanitarian crisis since the end of World War II.

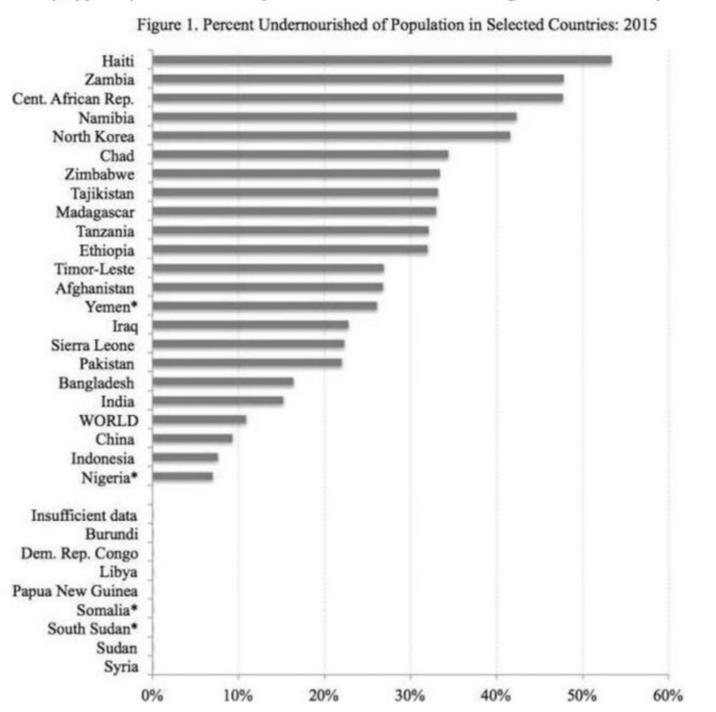
Also, as the obesity epidemic continues to spread globally, growing numbers of men, women and children are facing increased health risks, including cardiovascular disease (mainly heart disease and stroke), type 2 diabetes, high blood pressure, musculoskeletal disorders, breathing problems and some cancers, often resulting in substantial disability and premature death. In addition to the serious health consequences, obesity has substantial economic costs, including medical care, job absenteeism, lower productivity and disability.

Certainly, a great deal has been said, written and actions taken concerning chronic undernourishment and obesity. Numerous local, national and international organisations are focused on these two food challenges, having adopted various policies, recommendations and goals and established relevant programmes to address the issues. In particular, the international community of nations has made commitments to eliminate hunger, achieve food security and improved nutrition by 2030 and also to promote and protect health through nutritious diet, healthy eating and increased physical activity.

Nevertheless, despite the expressed concerns, laudable goals, increased expenditures and commendable efforts, two critical questions concerning undernourishment and obesity remain largely unanswered. What to do when millions of people, not able to grow or buy sufficient food, become chronically undernourished? What to do when millions of people put on so much weight that they become obese?

Until those two fundamental questions are effectively resolved, the global food extremes of chronic undernourishment and obesity are likely to persist well into the foreseeable future.

The writer is an independent consulting demographer and a former director of the United Nations Population Division. Copyright: IPS



people aged 15 years and over, are reported for the populations of many developed countries as well as for those of some developing countries.

The highest rates of obesity, typically no less than 40 percent of adults, are observed in the small South Pacific island nations, including Kiribati, Samoa and Tonga. Other countries with high obesity rates among those aged 15 years and over are: the United States (38 percent), Saudi Arabia (34), Mexico (32), New Zealand (31), Hungary (30), Australia (28), the United Kingdom (27), South Africa (27) and Canada (26). In contrast, some of the lowest rates of obesity are found among Asian populations: Japan (4 percent), India (5), South Korea (5), Indonesia (6) and China (7).

percent), followed by Hispanic Americans (42), white Americans (35) and Asian Americans (12).

Since the obesity epidemic began, not a single country has seen a reversal of trends. While fewer than one in ten people in OECD countries were obese in 1980, obesity rates have doubled or tripled in subsequent decades and are continuing to rise.

Obesity levels are projected to be higher in the coming years, especially as obesity among children has increased substantially worldwide. Childhood obesity in the United States, for example, has more than tripled since the 1970s and now stands at about one in five school-aged children having obesity. Also, a recent report of European countries found that obesity rates were higher in younger adolescents

## LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

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### Make travelling to India easier

The Daily Star published a news report titled "India eases movement through 2 ICPS, 24 airports" on June 6, 2017. I would like to point out that this will have little impact on movement of travelers from Bangladesh.

Most people travel to India from Bangladesh for sight-seeing. Even though the cold places of India are most popular for Bangladeshi tourists, we are restricted from beautiful locations like Sikkim. We should be able to travel to Changrabandha, Banglabandah, Haldibari, Gangtok, Lachung, Zero point and Changu Lake, just like visitors from other foreign countries. The areas bordering China may remain out of bounds. Tourist offices in Silliguri and Kolkata should be allowed to issue permits for visits. Finally, flights from Dhaka to Bagdora should be allowed.

I hope the friendly country of India will consider the above suggestions. It would encourage us to travel to India much more. A visitor  
 By post

