

# The truth hidden in plain sight

Indifference to modern-day slavery in Bangladesh trickles down from the top



NAHELA NOWSHIN

It was about four months ago when I first read *Atlantic's* cover story "My Family's Slave" by Pulitzer Prize-winning journalist Alex Tizon. The story was about a woman called Lola, a domestic help who immigrated from the Philippines to the United States with Tizon's family in the 60s. Lola was his mother's childhood nanny—a "gift" from his maternal grandfather. Lola served the family for more than five decades. She worked without pay, was kept back from going to the Philippines by Tizon's parents, and suffered physical and emotional abuse for years.

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It wasn't until the age of 11 that Tizon realised Lola was his family's slave. Tizon's firsthand account of modern-day slavery went viral. It instantly sparked off a much-needed, heated debate on social media. Interestingly though, many Filipinos jumped to Tizon's defence when questions about his own complicity in the enslavement of Lola arose. They argued that westerners without an understanding of the Filipino context were too quick to judge him. After all, what do they know about the culture of Filipino society where stay-in maids like Lola are nothing uncommon?

It made me think, Bangladeshis, too, would perhaps react in a similar manner had the article been about a Bangladeshi domestic worker instead of Lola. Many would say, "We treat our housemaids far better than that." But the more introspective among us, instead of wallowing in self-righteousness, would point to the

ubiquity of child labour and underpaid house help who toil away in near slavery-like conditions behind closed doors. The Global Slavery Index 2016 revealed some startling facts about slavery in the 21st century. Forty-five million people live in modern slavery globally, out of which an astounding thirty million, or two-thirds, are from the Asia Pacific. Bangladesh ranks 10th out of a total of 167 countries and fourth in Asia. The number of people living in modern slavery in the country is 1,531,300—equivalent to the total population of Bahrain.

According to surveys, whereas forced labour affects more men (85 percent), forced marriage disproportionately affects more women (88 percent). The areas primarily affected by modern slavery in Bangladesh today are the manufacturing of garments, shrimp and dry fish farming and production, commercial sexual exploitation, child marriage and drug production.

It's not like there isn't work being done to educate people about modern-day slavery in Bangladesh—an anathema to the most fundamental values of any nation—and the need to root it out. But somewhere down the line, we have failed. The fact is that we are unbothered—much like our collective indifference to the hypothetical situation had "My Family's Slave" been about a Bangladeshi domestic worker somewhere in the Middle East instead of a Filipino immigrant to the US. But can you blame the people when for the government eradicating modern slavery seems to be an agenda only on paper?

Slavery comes in many forms: bonded labour, forced labour, forced marriage, etc. Unlike chattel slavery, which once functioned and thrived under the auspices of the law, these types of slavery, despite being illegal,



Although the Bangladesh Labour Act 2006 prohibits children under 14 from being employed, child labour, one of many faces of modern slavery, remains widespread in the country.

PHOTO: STAR

continue to flourish in the present day due to the presence of wide, intricate networks of human traffickers, recruitment agencies, and so on. While it is important to note the differences between the many forms of slavery, the underlying fact is that they are all rooted in coercion.

As revealing as the Global Slavery Index is, statistics alone don't tell the whole story. Numbers don't quite capture the extent of government inaction.

We know by now that the mere formulation of laws is simply not enough: Of what use is a piece of

legislation if not implemented? In fact, the state minister for labour and employment echoed this very sentiment recently. He was speaking at a seminar on the repression of domestic workers, and the discussions focused on the need to implement the Domestic Workers Protection and Welfare Policy 2015 and formulate a law based on this policy. The state minister said, "It makes me frustrated knowing that the upper-class and educated people in society are repressing the domestic workers. If they have that attitude, who are we going to formulate the law for? The educated people know that there is a labour law in the country. Do they follow it?"

You can't argue with that logic, but this coming from an authority figure responsible for implementing the law is absurd. Are laws not created precisely so that accountability can be established? And how do you go about doing that without enforcing the law? Despite the Bangladesh Labour Act (BLA) 2006 and Prevention and Suppression of Human Trafficking Act (PSHTA) 2012, why are forced labour, child labour and human trafficking so widespread?

Eradicating modern slavery in a country marred by entrenched poverty is no easy task, especially when the majority of it occurs in the private economy—in our private homes and private businesses—and has seeped into so many aspects of our society today. But if the state minister's outlook is any indication of the government's indifference to tackling modern-day slavery in Bangladesh, I would beg to differ and go as far as to say that it is not the lack of laws we are suffering from.

It's the lack of enforcement of the myriad of laws that's more offensive.

Nahela Nowshin is a member of the editorial team at *The Daily Star*.

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PROJECT SYNDICATE

# Republicans' responsibility for gun violence



YASHENG HUANG

After the mass shooting at a concert in Las Vegas, Nevada, on October 1, Republican Senate Majority Leader Mitch McConnell told reporters that, "It's particularly inappropriate to politicise an event

of gun control. And they must be held accountable for their positions, which reflect an instinct, both telling and chilling, to view any discussion about gun violence as a political issue, offering an opportunity to score partisan points, rather than as a policy and public-safety issue.

One could argue that the repeated mass shootings in the United States over the past

decades have all had a Republican stamp on them. After every (predictable) tragedy, the party mobilises to block any legislation that might strengthen gun controls. In 1996, the Republican-controlled Congress went so far as to threaten to defund the Centres for Disease Control and Prevention if it even

tried to study gun violence. Until the Sandy Hook massacre in 2012, the CDC was forced to abstain from conducting any such research. The response to the Las Vegas shooting from Paul Ryan, the Republican Speaker of the House of Representatives, has been to dismiss the issue of guns, and to instead frame the tragedy as primarily a mental-

health issue. Accordingly, Ryan has been breathily touting reforms to the mental-health system that Republicans supposedly worked on in the past. But Ryan chose not to mention the fact that, this past February, his Republican colleagues (and four Democrats) in the

Senate voted to revoke a rule requiring the Social Security Administration to report the names of mentally-disabled Social Security recipients to the National Instant Criminal Background Check System. After that vote, US President Donald Trump repealed the rule, allowing mentally ill individuals to purchase deadly firearms without hindrance.

Journalists and pundits tend to be vague when assessing culpability in this distinctly American tale. They blame the failure to address America's gun-violence problem on Congress, the "Washington establishment," or the political system as a whole. Such manufactured even-handedness is tantamount to "fake news." It is time to call a spade a spade: the Republican Party is overwhelmingly responsible.

Consider the issue of "bump stocks," the gun modification that the perpetrator of the Las Vegas massacre used to be able to fire faster. Some Republican senators have now drawn praise for indicating that they will support a ban on the device. But when Democratic Senator Diane Feinstein proposed a similar ban in 2013, Republicans overwhelmingly opposed her. After decades of such staunch opposition to any semblance of gun control, the small amount of flexibility Republicans are showing on banning bump stocks—which will just make killing with semi-automatic weapons slightly slower—should not be reason for high praise.

To be sure, some congressional Democrats and independents have occasionally joined

with Republicans in blocking gun-control legislation. But there is a fundamental difference: Democrats who oppose gun controls do so in defiance of their party's official programme, whereas Republicans do so in conformity with theirs. As a result, the degree of culpability between the parties is not even close. For evidence of this, one need only follow the money. According to the *Los Angeles Times*, in 2016, the National Rifle Association (NRA) donated USD 52.6 million to electoral campaigns, of which just USD 265—yes, you read that right—went to Democratic candidates. McConnell received USD 1.3 million from the NRA in 2016 alone.

After the 2012 massacre at Sandy Hook Elementary School in Newtown, Connecticut, where a lone gunman murdered 26 schoolchildren and their teachers, Senator Joe Manchin, a Democrat, proposed a bill to require universal background checks on all commercial gun purchases. The Manchin Amendment failed to gain the 60 votes needed to overcome a Republican filibuster. Just four of the 54 senators who voted in favour of the bill were Republicans; only five of the 46 senators who voted against it were Democrats.

Mass murderers such as Adam Lanza at Sandy Hook, Omar Mateen at the Pulse nightclub in Orlando in 2016, Stephen Paddock in Las Vegas, and countless others pulled the trigger. But the Republican Party acted as a political accomplice to all of these murderous acts.

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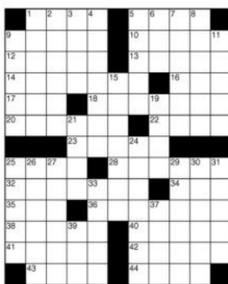


After the mass shooting in Las Vegas left at least 59 dead and more than 500 injured, McConnell insisted that it was "entirely premature to be discussing about legislative solutions" to America's gun-violence epidemic.

PHOTO: AFP

CROSSWORD BY THOMAS JOSEPH

- ACROSS**
- 1 Those people
  - 5 Poet Khayyam
  - 9 Cheer for a diva
  - 10 Yucatan natives
  - 12 Broadcast
  - 13 Put up
  - 14 Frugal
  - 16 "Chandelier" singer
  - 17 High trains
  - 18 Flying high
  - 20 Tyrant
  - 22 Mineral sources
  - 23 Cut off
  - 25 Massage target
  - 28 Starts
  - 32 Generous virtue
- DOWN**
- 1 Diamond feat
  - 2 Badger
  - 3 At any time
  - 4 Jefferson's successor
  - 5 Last letter
  - 6 Spoil
  - 7 Mate's answer
  - 8 Wisconsin city
  - 9 Headquartered
  - 11 Antlered animals
  - 15 Contrary to good manners
  - 19 Fishing poles
  - 21 Jury member
  - 24 Set to wed
  - 25 Elroy's dog
  - 26 Burger topper
  - 27 Plane's place
  - 29 Clarke of "Game of Thrones"
  - 30 Fire-starting stuff
  - 31 Long stories
  - 33 Resort spots
  - 37 Took the bus
  - 39 In the past



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