

Runaway cost of living

DMCH doctors' work stoppage

Represents current culture in hospitals!

WHAT took place at Dhaka Medical College Hospital (DMCH) on Sunday can only be described as shameful. Claiming the wrongful death of a patient, the family members along with other people assaulted several doctors, nurses, and Ansar men and vandalised the ward, after which the emergency complex was shut down by doctors and hospital staff in protest. As if this was not appalling enough, the lockdown lasted three hours which then led to over a hundred patients in need of emergency care being turned away. Both the assault on the hospital staff and the shutdown of the emergency unit are highly condemnable.

Where do we even begin? These incidents reflect the history of negligence and violence that we are so used to seeing in hospitals all over the country. First, this goes to show that medical professionals—despite repeatedly having voiced concerns about their safety—are not even accorded the minimum level of protection that is required for any workplace environment.

Second, the fact that DMCH hospital staff resorted to locking down the emergency complex as an act of protest is indicative of a prevalent attitude of negligence towards patients. Why, we ask, were innocent patients denied care and made to suffer? For a hospital to turn away patients is a gross offence and should be considered as such.

The authorities of DMCH should take the necessary steps to ensure the safety of hospital staff and all those involved in shutting down the emergency unit should be strongly disciplined. And the preventive measures should apply to all hospitals—both public and private.

Little value of human life

Show zero tolerance for child abuse

IN what is sadly, no longer a surprising incident, Aziza, a student of class V, was allegedly set on fire over the allegation of stealing a mobile phone in Khainput village, Shibpur upazila, Narsingdi, on Friday night. She died at Dhaka Medical College Hospital (DMCH) on Saturday morning. Aziza Begum was set on fire allegedly by her aunt for ostensibly "stealing a mobile phone".

The killers of Aziza have been rightly condemned by a parliamentary body that suggested that the government ensure exemplary punishment for them. The promptness in acknowledgement and condemnation of the incident is admirable. However, acknowledgement and condemnation are no longer doing enough to change the situation. In line with the parliamentary body's suggestion, we would also like to insist on an exemplary punishment for Aziza's killers. However, it is not only Aziza that has suffered this fate. *The Daily Star* reported an arrest of two people on October 27, at Char Shafipur Haat of Barisal's Muladi for torturing a boy accusing him of, again, "stealing a mobile phone". Heinous incidents such as this should have no place in society.

Violence against children has become rampant in Bangladesh. Aziza's death is a testament to how little society has come to value life. In addition to strengthening rules and laws, we must also ask ourselves what values are we promoting in society that assigns such little value to human life? It is unacceptable that a society where things are valued more than people is perpetuated. We hope that Aziza's killers are duly punished and simultaneously zero tolerance of abuse of children, the most vulnerable in society, is practised. In turn, ethical codes that allow us to assign appropriate value to human life should be instilled in our moral compass.



NO FRILLS
 PEOPLE, particularly those who belong to the lower income groups, have been reeling under the weight of rising cost of living for some years now. A report in a leading Bangla daily on October 27 spelled out the situation in a nutshell. According to the Consumers Association of Bangladesh (CAB), the cost of living for Dhaka residents has risen 71 percent over the period 2009–2016. This survey is based on a calculation of cost increases of 114 foodstuffs and 14 utility services (and does not include cost rise of education, health and daily travel).

A decade ago, a couple where both members worked could pay house rent, send their children to school and maintain a reasonable standard of living and still have savings. Those days appear to be gone for good. The runaway inflation when it comes to the manner in which our kitchen market prices operate, the rate at which house rent appears to increase every year and the yearly hikes in utility service prices have all but put people in some income brackets in a situation where it is becoming increasingly untenable to live with families in Dhaka city.

CAB reinforces this with data. According to the association, the rent value of a two-room concrete house/apartment used to be Tk 10,800 in 2009 which had risen to an average of Tk 19,700 in the year 2016 (a rise of 82.4 percent in less than a decade). The cost of per unit of electricity has risen nearly 93 percent, water bill has gone up by 56 percent and increase in public transport per kilometre has gone up by 45 percent. When we look at food inflation, prices have actually risen several times each year over this period. Again, if we refer to CAB information, the price of coarse rice went up by Tk 12/kg (from Tk 23 to Tk 35) over this period and was trading at Tk 46/kg in the month of September. Mapping out all products in various categories is unnecessary to get an idea of how prices have increased exponentially over a



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PHOTO: PRABIR DAS

seven-year period. Incomes unfortunately have not kept up with such increases and hence the problem.

The biggest casualty of all this of course is that people are unable to set aside a portion of their earnings as savings. Things are in fact at a stage that some income groups are in debt a major portion of the year and hence there is no question of savings. When we couple food inflation (the highest rise) along with other indicators, Dhaka residents are in a major fix, but the lower middle class and working class are hardest hit. When the price of utility services rises (power, water), this affects producers too. However, whatever extra costs incurred at production level are usually passed on to end users, i.e. retail consumers. But there are discrepancies here, particularly in the urban public transport sector. A fractional rise in cost of fuel is not corresponded by an equal

rise in fare; it is usually much more. The same can actually be said about the pricing of products and services that an average resident uses. House rent for instance follows no set pattern and tenants are completely at the mercy of landlords. One cannot fully explain how wholesale and retail kitchen markets work in our country. Every time we suffer a natural calamity, we find ourselves at the short end of the stick—and as pointed out above, finding out the price of coarse rice (the biggest selling segment in the rice market) going up Tk 12 per kilo in the span of a month! The education sector, the bulk of which is dominated by the private sector, follows no set pattern when it comes to setting tuition fees. Beyond the regular monthly tuition fees of course is a slew of other "charges" that can range from "development fees" to whatever the institution deems fit.

It appears that we have built for ourselves a *laissez-faire* system which is defined in economics as: "abstention by governments from interfering in the workings of the free market." That certainly looks to be the case for the majority of Dhaka's populace. We have regulatory bodies and certain rules to look after consumers' interests. However, these regulations are confined to print and there are hardly visible steps to implement them. People will continue to adapt to harder times—by consuming less, enjoying fewer city amenities, getting into more debt, etc. Until our policymakers actually start practising what they preach i.e. implementing laws enacted or rules formulated to protect consumers' interests, people will be left to fend for themselves—as they always have—and the quality of life will continue to decline in Dhaka city.

Syed Mansur Hashim is Assistant Editor, *The Daily Star*.

REFLECTIONS OF THE WEEK

In search of the "bad" men?



ONLY a few weeks ago, the #MeToo campaign conquered social media. It took just a few hours to spread and become global with women around the world, including almost every woman I know, adding their names to the movement. It was easy to join in, add my status to it, but the emotions that came flooding afterwards stayed for days. Once the anger and the hurt brought up by the stories and the memories faded, a realisation seeped in.

My Facebook also had a lot of responses from men in the first few days—not necessarily about their #MeToo stories, but more about their reaction to seeing the vast outpour about experiences of abuse and harassment from the women around

everyone has some power. And if we are not aware of the power and privilege we hold over others, we will surely misuse them, intentionally or not. I thought this was what all these men on my friend list were waiting for—a chance to think about what they can do and be. To say the least, it has been a disappointing week.

Let me explain here, that I mention the hashtag campaigns to showcase how differently I saw people, largely the male population, react to issues around sexual harassment and abuse. Somehow it is easier to show support and sympathy, to give kudos to us "strong, powerful women" who have "been through so much" and still thrived. But, there is very little, if any response when they are asked to think about their own role in this scenario. Most will outright deny ever having benefitted or misused their privilege; many will even say that they don't know anyone who treats any woman like that.

So, they come and ask us where these men who abuse women are. They write

These stories are also about a time, when he was a teenager, sitting with his buddies in class and rating the girls based on their looks; and if the girls happened to hear about it they would definitely take it as compliment, right? The stories are also about that time, when he laughingly said to his girlfriend that, "if I want something, I make sure to get it". It wasn't a threat of course; it was about their love story. But he didn't notice that her smile disappeared from her eyes and remained strained on her lips, while her mind raced trying to figure out if this was a sign of trouble. The stories are about the time when he argued with his wife and wanted to make it up to her that night, but he didn't notice the tear at the corner of her eye when he turned around and went to sleep.

These stories are not only about the ones that make newspaper headlines, they are also about the everyday lives of women—the strong ones, the loud ones, the soft ones, the silent ones. These men are not walking around masking their

I believe that all human beings are capable of abusing their power—men, women, and children alike, because everyone has some power. And if we are not aware of the power and privilege we hold over others, we will surely misuse them, intentionally or not.

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

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Rethinking the quota system

Bangladesh, being a democratic country, should ensure equal rights for all its citizens through the abolition of discriminatory practices. However, the notorious "quota system" in the job market is a major obstacle to ensuring equality of opportunity.

It is my opinion that the quota system restricts the government's ability to put in meritorious candidates in government positions. A large number of relatively underserving candidates are joining the public service sector by taking advantage of the quota system. Reportedly, more than 55 percent first class government posts are reserved for those belonging to one quota group or another. This problem, however, is not restricted to only the public service sector, but also exists in the higher education system.

I think that the time has come for us to rethink the rationality behind this system. I hope that the authorities will reduce the number of jobs reserved under it or abolish the quota system entirely.

Tamzid Hossain, Dhaka University

Developing skilled drivers

A Bengali daily recently reported that the government will provide formal institutional training to 500,000 drivers in the next five years to improve their driving skills. Bangladesh Road Transport Corporation (BTRC) will facilitate the training, according to the report. The programme, it said, will increase road safety and create employment opportunities abroad. Those employed abroad will be able to contribute to the national economy by sending remittance home.

I would like to commend the government for taking such an initiative. I want to urge the authorities to implement the programme efficiently and in accordance with the plan.

Md Ashraf Hossain, By email



them. They spoke about taking a stance against this. So, I was enthusiastic, if not excited when I saw the #HowICanChange campaign come about. You probably never even heard of it, because it barely made a chink in the armour.

I did however share my #HowICanChange status: what my role can be to become a less abusive person. I believe that all human beings are capable of abusing their power—men, women, and children alike, because

about how this is not a women's issue, but an issue men need to deal with; about how lucky they themselves have been to be raised by strong women, so they have always respected women. But, what they don't do is to pause and let these stories affect them, to enter them. What they don't do is to listen, and think about what this means. The stories are not just about being held down and raped, or being punched in the face, or being followed from the bus stand.

"evil faces"; they are probably just like you and me, who many times never even realised how they affected others in this manner. Especially when many of these issues were not talked about, were not taught. But with time, they have grown up and become a better man, a good husband, a wonderful father—just like you.

You—my open-minded, feminist allied male friend—you ask me, where these "bad" men are? Because you want to help me fight them? But I remain

quiet, because if I was being honest, I would say: my worry is not the bad men "out there"; I don't deal with them every day. I worry about all the other men—the men who are in my life; mainly because I love them, I care for them. The men in my family, the ones I am friends with and work with, the ones married to my sisters and friends, the ones raising the little girls and boys I love, and hope for them to see a better world. These are the men that disappoint me, that causes me pain, because they are all good men, and they want to be part of the better world we are all talking about.

But they will not pause, they will not reflect and ask themselves the tough questions. They will not realise that the most important stance they can take is the one of recognising their own privilege and the ability to abuse it. Maybe they think they will be lesser beings if they admitted to this, that maybe we will judge them and hate them. Little do they know how strong we are and how we can only get better together when we create space for each other. Little do they know how strong they can be once they have shed the insecure cloaks they hide under. These are the men who make me cry. Because, they will not look in the mirror and ask: can you think about a time when you were THAT man?

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