

## Shame the child abusers not the abused

*Survivors must be protected by the system*

**A**n in-depth story in this Friday's Star Weekend magazine gives a chilling picture of child sexual abuse in our society and how the system works against the survivors. Apart from the social stigma attached to such situations, the legal mechanisms available and the community they live in often fail them. The survey by Star Weekend found that perpetrators included uncles, religious teachers, home tutors, cousins and staff at school.

A month long survey and interviews of 300 individuals have revealed that as many as 195 interviewees were child sexual assault survivors themselves with 31 being rape survivors. Many of these survivors never told anyone, not even family members, because they felt ashamed. Among them were male survivors who had also been sexually abused at very young ages.

This report has also unfolded the gross apathy of law enforcers towards these incidents, especially when it comes to poor street children. Child domestic workers are also at great risk of being abused.

But overall, children from all socio-economic backgrounds can fall prey to these predators. It is obvious that there is a cloud of silence and ignorance in our society surrounding child sexual abuse. Parents and teachers must have open discussions about child abuse and make children aware of what it means. Children must be encouraged to speak out if such abuses occur with the assurance that they will be protected. This involves sensitising law enforcers and making sure that they take assertive action against perpetrators. Many abusers even after being arrested get bail because of loopholes in the legal system, further discouraging survivors or their families to file cases. This has to stop. Sexual predators, no matter who they are, have to be given exemplary punishment. Most of all, we must protect our children from this diabolical onslaught.

## Inequality gap on the rise

*Integrated policies needed to curb it*

**A** recent study by a think-tank has exposed the underbelly of the development scenario in Bangladesh in which rising GDP growth and rising income and wealth inequalities walk hand in hand. The study, conducted by the Centre for Policy Dialogue, showed that in 2016, the top five percent of Bangladesh's income-earners earned 121 times more than the bottom five percent, in a jump from 31.5 times in 2010. Which means, during the interim period, they have almost quadrupled their share of the total national income.

The situation is no less frustrating when it comes to wealth inequality between the top five percent and the bottom five, which has more than doubled during the same period. The findings are a clear indication that while the country may be performing better in certain development indicators, income and asset inequalities continue to exist and may emerge as a big threat to the overall economy if adequate policy attention is not given to the poor, vulnerable groups and the conditions that perpetuate inequalities and marginalisation.

True, inequality is a global problem, and Bangladesh is not immune to the effects from the global free market economy. But it needs to fight persistently since the solution is achievable. What we need is a strong will to reduce inequalities. We should also identify the many vulnerable groups within the society, and adopt and implement needs-specific policies that adequately address their conditions for an inclusive transformation. Equally important is a large-scale social movement, of which the political leadership will be an integral part, so that no one is left behind in the journey to growth.

## LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

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### Mismanaged healthcare system

An article published by this newspaper on December 7 about hospital mismanagement caught my attention. The report shows how terribly the healthcare system is managed in our country. Then there are ethical issues. Most of the private hospitals only focus on making profit instead of providing quality healthcare. I wonder why our policymakers are not concerned about the issue.

Every year thousands of people go abroad for getting what they appear to believe proper treatment. In the process, our indigenous healthcare industry suffers a huge loss. Had they concentrated on providing quality service in a competitive price, they would have won the trust of the public.

It is high time we prioritised reforming our healthcare sector. As new private hospitals are built across the country on a regular basis, the government also should initiate a policy to properly regulate them.

Al Amin, Dhaka

# Corruption is anti-development

*On the occasion of International Anti-Corruption Day, Dr Iftekharuzzaman, executive director of Transparency International Bangladesh (TIB), talks to Eresh Omar Jamal of The Daily Star about the corrosive impact of corruption, one of the biggest obstacles to Bangladesh's development, and how we can make progress in reducing it.*



Dr Iftekharuzzaman

How would you describe the state of corruption in our country and what is the biggest impediment to fighting it? Corruption is pervasive in Bangladesh, a key challenge against development and social transformation. Corruption is so deep and wide at both micro and macro levels that it threatens to become a way of life. Corruption is a global problem. It exists in all countries of the world—big or small, developed or developing—which is exactly why the UN Convention against Corruption was adopted on December 9, 2003. The Government of Bangladesh has recently set a great precedence for other Member States of the UN by deciding to officially observe the International Anti-Corruption Day. We take it as an example of high level political will to fight corruption in Bangladesh.

The biggest impediment against effective corruption control in Bangladesh, as in case of most other countries where corruption is pervasive, is that political commitment remains far from truly enforced without fear or favour, which allows corruption to be often condoned and protected. When any crime remains unpunished, and when the criminals, in this case the corrupt, are allowed to get away and enjoy political patronage it is only natural that the menace will flourish further.

**We are experiencing one of the highest growth rates in the country. How is this possible if corruption is as high as TIB says?**

Countries can, and do grow in spite of the worst forms of corruption. The key issue is the cost of corruption. Bangladesh has indeed been maintaining commendably high rates of growth of GDP in the range of 6-7 percent annually for over two decades now. The question is whether we could have achieved more. There are strong reasons to believe that subject to effective corruption control, double-digit growth is well within Bangladesh's reach.

We could have achieved at least 2-3 percent higher annual GDP growth if corruption could be moderately controlled. This is according to credible research and referred to by the finance minister. The enormity of implications of 10 percent GDP growth is self-explanatory. The other dimension of cost of corruption is that while its burden falls upon everyone it is substantially higher for households in lower income category than those with higher income.

Corruption has an in-built bias against the poor, disadvantaged and low-income sections of the society. They are directly affected by the increased cost of public services for bribery and limited or

even lack of access to services because of lack of capacity to pay bribe.

**Aside from economic, what are some other major societal effects of corruption? What is the importance of bringing these issues in particular, into the public discourse?**

Corruption is a menace that causes wastage and plunder of public resources; it undermines the prospect of building a merit-based society by compromising a level playing field in various professions including public service, business and even politics. It distorts competitive business and public contracting, and damages investment environment.

Corruption increases the cost of investment and entrepreneurship. It lowers the quality and effectiveness of public expenditures; reduces revenue collection and promotes rent-seeking.

Corruption is increasingly linked to violation of human rights and breach of rule of law. Corruption kills innocent people as we have seen in case of Rana Plaza and many more such tragedies in Bangladesh.

Corruption causes underperformance in governance and undermines the government's ability to deliver. It generates a sense of disempowerment among people which in turn leads to accepting corruption as a way of life and causes erosion of values and ethics.

It is a crime that undermines social cohesion, political stability and democratic progress. Corruption feeds into zero-sum game of politics especially when office of politics and government are viewed as a mandate to enjoy personal benefit and enrichment. It undermines the infrastructure of democratic accountability by affecting proper functioning of institutions like

parliament, judiciary, administration, law enforcement agencies, election commission, anti-corruption commission, etc., which become instruments for monopolisation of political space. The state structure can thus be exposed to kleptocratic capture. Corruption erodes trust of citizens in leadership, public offices and institutions.

The importance of bringing these to public discourse is enormous. The more the people are informed about the deleterious implications of corruption the greater is the possibility of informed and effective public demand to control corruption and bring the perpetrators to justice. It can also lead to increased moral and political obligation of the government, the Anti-Corruption Commission and other stakeholders to be responsive and take action against corruption. It also emboldens people within the Government and political space who can be change agents.

Sustained discourse on negative implications of corruption can function as an antidote to the denial syndrome which is one of the reasons why corruption flourishes and gets protected. We have seen how highly placed individuals who in reaction to our reports accused us as motivated, baseless and ignorant or even conspiratorial and seditious, subsequently used data from the same reports to express frustration and helplessness about the state of corruption.

Sustained reporting and knowledge-based campaign can lead to legal, policy and institutional reforms. The fact that there is a dedicated institution called Anti-Corruption Commission, that Bangladesh is a State Party to the UN Convention against Corruption, that we

have the Right to Information Act and Whistleblower Protection Act, that we have the National Integrity Strategy, that the Government has decided to officially observe the International Anti-Corruption Day are but a few examples of the positive outcomes of keeping the anti-corruption discourse live.

**What are the tested ways to fight corruption in a developing country like ours?**

Corruption control is difficult, though not at all impossible. In our understanding there are four interrelated elements of an effective anti-corruption strategy. First, corruption control must be at the core of political agenda of government and politics. This commitment to control and prevent corruption is not enough to be only in paper and words. It must be enforced without fear or favour to anyone.

Secondly, the corrupt must be punished in the due process irrespective of social, economic and political status or identity. To create effective deterrence, there must be robust and credible evidences all around that corruption is not a stepping stone for illegal accumulation of wealth. Corruption will never be controlled if the corrupt, especially those with links with politically or otherwise powerful quarters, instead of being subjected to accountability, enjoy impunity.

Thirdly, the key institutions of democratic accountability or the national integrity system (NIS) must be able to function independently and effectively as mandated by law. The collective integrity strength of the ACC, parliament, executive, judiciary, law enforcement agencies, Office of the Comptroller and Auditor General, auditor general, media and private sector holds the key to rule of law, accountable governance and corruption control. If the neutrality, objectivity, integrity and effectiveness of these institutions are compromised or if they lend themselves to be used for promoting partisan political agenda of the ruling authority, corruption will flourish.

Fourthly, it is equally important that people stand up against corruption. A robust people engagement programme, especially youth engagement is extremely important to fight corruption. It is the people who have to create the demand against corruption; demand that political leaders develop and enforce the political will; demand that the corrupt are brought to justice; and demand effective institutions. Finally, it is the responsibility of the Government to shun a "shoot the messenger" syndrome and create conditions in which people can raise such voice and demand against corruption free from fear, inhibition or intimidation.

## PROJECT SYNDICATE

### Europe's Chance to Lead on Robotics and AI



GUY VERHOFSTADT

**A**t least since Mary Shelley created Victor Frankenstein and his iconic monster in 1818, humans have had a morbid fascination with man-made beings that could

threaten our existence. From the American television adaptation of "Westworld," which depicts an amusement park populated by androids, to the "Terminator" films, in which super-intelligent machines aim to destroy mankind, we often indulge the paranoid fantasy that our technological creations might turn on us.

In *Homo Deus*, Hebrew University's Yuval Noah Harari argues that existing technological advances have already put mankind on a path toward its own demise. Developments in artificial intelligence (AI), algorithms that make better decisions than humans, and genetic engineering all imply that most human beings will be superfluous in the not-too-distant future.

At the Web Summit conference in Lisbon last month, the renowned physicist Stephen Hawking addressed the threats as well as the opportunities that lie ahead. "Success in creating effective AI," Hawking said, "could be the biggest event in the history of our civilisation. Or the worst." The problem, he added, is that, "We just don't know. So we cannot know if we will be infinitely helped by AI, or ignored by it and sidelined, or conceivably destroyed by it."

Despite their stark warnings about the possible implications of existing technologies, however, both Hawking and Harari believe that we still have time to shape the future for ourselves. The changes ahead will raise a number of pertinent questions for

policymakers. What will the spread of robotics and AI mean for defense and security or the future of employment? And what rules can ensure that these innovations are collectively beneficial?

So far, mainstream political debate about these questions has been limited. That is not surprising: as we saw with animal cloning, politics tends to lag behind science. In the European Union, single-market regulations are often adopted years after the scientific breakthroughs that made them

these technologies, while also guaranteeing a standard level of safety and security. Although I disagree with some of the proposals currently on offer, the fact that we are at least having a debate on the matter is a positive development.

While other countries are also considering new rules for robots and AI, the EU has a unique opportunity to take the lead. By acting now, we can ensure that the EU will not be forced to follow regulatory frameworks set by



'Sophia' an artificially intelligent (AI) human-like robot developed by Hong Kong-based humanoid robotics company Hanson Robotics.

PHOTO: AFP

necessary. But when it comes to robotics and AI, we cannot afford to hesitate.

Fortunately, as Hawking pointed out, some European policymakers have already begun legislative work on this front. In February of this year, the European Parliament adopted a resolution calling for the establishment of new rules governing AI and robotics. We are asking the European Commission to propose measures that will maximise the economic benefits of

other countries. Ultimately, global rules will be required; and Europe has a chance to set the standard for what they should look like.

For starters, we will soon need a specific legal status for robots, so that we can determine who is liable for any damage they may cause. Moreover, as the Microsoft founder and philanthropist Bill Gates has warned, robotics and advanced algorithms will likely eliminate many jobs. In fact, the World Economic Forum estimates that five

million jobs across 15 developed countries will be lost to automation by 2020.

Given that ongoing changes in the means of production have already kick-started this trend, Gates and some in the European Parliament have suggested that robots be taxed to pay for human services. Whether that is the best solution is now the topic of much debate; but, clearly, some kind of compromise will need to be made.

Robotics and AI will also raise profound ethical issues for liberal politicians, particularly with respect to privacy and safety. Fortunately, there is a broader political consensus on this issue than on taxation. The European Parliament has proposed a voluntary code of conduct for engineers and others working in the field of robotics. Ethical as well as legal standards are needed to ensure that robots and related technologies are designed with respect for human dignity in mind.

Lastly, the European Parliament has called on the European Commission to consider creating a new EU-level agency for robotics and AI, to provide public officials with technical, ethical, and regulatory expertise. To my mind, this would be a sensible step forward, given that an estimated 30 percent of the world's leading companies will employ a chief robotics officer by 2019.

We can be almost certain that today's technological advances will have a profound effect on our lives and livelihoods, akin to a new Industrial Revolution. By establishing regulations and standards now, the EU can ensure that all Europeans will benefit from the coming changes, rather than be engulfed by chaos.

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