

A false alarm?

There is no need to panic about large-scale job cuts due to automation in Bangladesh's apparel industry

MUSHFIQUE WADUD

FOLLOWING the visit of robot Sophia to Bangladesh in December last year, there has been a lot of discussion about the possibilities of using automation in industries and its impact on jobs. As the ready-made garment industry is our lifeline, the discussion has mainly been on the impact of automation in the RMG industry.

Most analysts are predicting that there will be huge job cuts in the garment industry in the near future if the industry fully adopts automation. The discussions have created panic among workers and policymakers; there was some misinformation and exaggeration in the predictions as well.

These discussions also show that some of our analysts may not have up-to-date information. For example, a prominent economist and apparel sector expert who also happens to be a research director of a think tank confused automation for e-commerce when he was asked if there have been job cuts due to automation already in the apparel sector. Automation and e-commerce are two different topics. The economist also claimed that the demand for workers has declined due to automation. The idea of "robotic fashion" is still at a nascent stage and a good number of Bangladeshi factories haven't yet adopted the new technology. Nothing indicates that automation has already contributed to large-scale job cuts in Bangladesh's apparel sector.

It cannot be denied that automation will severely affect jobs in various industries. In 2016, in a report, International Labour Organization said that in the next few decades, about 56 percent of all salaried workers in Cambodia, Indonesia, the Philippines, Thailand, and Vietnam could be displaced by automation and advanced technologies, such as 3D printing. However, there is still an ongoing debate about whether robots will affect large-scale tailoring jobs in the apparel industry.

In 1970, the president of Blue Jeans Corporation William J Bank predicted that there would be a man on Mars before the production of apparel was automated. In an article last year, *The Economist* said that after almost half a century, the Blue Jeans Corporation president has not yet been proved wrong. There have been outstanding developments in the research of apparel automation in the last five decades but there are still doubts about whether apparel automation will be a success in the near future. The reason is that a robot cannot do the same type of sewing and designing that a human can do. Sewing machines have been used since the 19th century but a human hand is still needed to guide the work. Some processes of the apparel-making can certainly be automated. It is possible to use automation to cut fabric or



PHOTO: AMRAN HOSSAIN

While the discussion about automation in the apparel industry merits discussion, we should approach it with a grain of salt as demand for human-made apparel products will still exist.

sometimes sew buttons but it is difficult to make a machine in which fabric goes in one end and finished garments come out the other.

In recent years, two companies have advanced the idea of apparel automation. One is Atlanta-based textile-equipment manufacturer SoftWear Automation and the other is Seattle-based Sewbo. However, their success has been limited to producing t-shirts, towels and similar items, and analysts are still debating whether robots can produce jeans and other complex apparel items in the near future.

Even if robots can produce clothing, the finishing and the quality of products will not be the same as those produced using human hands. And demand for apparel products made by humans will not go away. No wonder handloom products are still popular.

The biggest issue, however, is concerning cost and technology transfer. Will robots be cheaper than Bangladesh's labour? Speaking to the *Financial Times*, automation software firm SoftWear's Chief Executive Palaniswamy Rajan admitted that when it comes to price, his sewbots can't beat workers in Bangladesh. There is also concern about technology adaption. Some big companies might adapt to new technologies in the shortest possible time but all factories will take time to do so.

While some of our analysts are creating panic about job cuts, the world's biggest companies are planning to increase their labour force. In January this year, New York-based business portal Quartz

ran a report stating that Hong Kong's Crystal Group is investing on low-wage labour instead of robots. Crystal Group is the world's largest apparel maker by production volume, according to research firm Euromonitor. The report said, "For now, at least, Crystal Group will not be replacing humans with machines. One reason is that while robots in use in other industries can work easily with stiff materials such as sheets of metal or plastic, they can't yet work with soft, flexible fabrics that stretch and distort during sewing." The report added that Crystal Group plans to increase its human staff in Bangladesh and Vietnam by 10 percent annually in the years ahead.

In an interview with the *Financial Times* (paywall), Crystal Group CEO Andrew Losaid said, "High-tech sewing robots are 'interesting' and could change how some companies make clothes, but in the near term they still can't beat cheap human labour on cost." The CEO also said, "The handling of soft materials is really hard for robots."

So while we should be concerned about the new technology and have discussions about apparel automation, we don't need to panic about large-scale job cuts in Bangladesh's apparel sector because this may not happen in the near future. And even if robotic fashion takes off, demand for apparel products made by humans will not simply erode.

Mushfique Wadud is a freelance journalist. Follow him on Twitter: @mushfiquewadud

WORLD DAY OF SOCIAL JUSTICE Safeguarding migrant workers is in everyone's interest



GUY RIDER

SOCIAL justice is a cornerstone of lasting peace and prosperous coexistence.

On this World Day of Social Justice, we are focusing on the world's 150 million migrant workers, many of whom face exploitation, discrimination and violence and lack even the most basic protections. This is particularly true for women, who make up 44 percent of migrant workers.

Most migration today is linked, directly or indirectly, to the search for decent work opportunities. But many migrant workers end up trapped in jobs with low pay and unsafe and unhealthy working conditions, often in the informal economy, without respect for their labour and other human rights. They often have to pay high recruitment fees to get a job, on average over a year's wages— with high chances of forced and child labour.

Migrant workers like all workers are entitled to fair treatment which is also key to preserving the social fabric of our societies and to sustainable development.

If labour migration is well-governed, fair and effective, it can deliver benefits and opportunities for migrant workers, their families and their host communities. It can balance labour supply and demand, help develop and transfer skills at all skill levels, contribute to social protection systems, foster business innovation, and enrich communities both culturally and socially.

Good governance will foster strong cooperation across migration corridors and regions. It should be guided by international labour standards, in particular the fundamental principles and rights at work and the relevant ILO and UN Conventions. The ILO's Multilateral Framework on Labour Migration and the General Principles and Operational Guidelines for Fair Recruitment offer further guidance.

The ILO is encouraging the adoption of fair labour migration governance frameworks at all levels—global, regional and national. These include a comprehensive, integrated and "whole of government" approach that engages labour ministries together with business, employers' and workers' organisations—those on the frontlines of labour markets.

In 2016 the United Nations General Assembly decided to develop a Global Compact on Safe, Orderly and Regular Migration to improve the governance of migration, address the challenges and to strengthen the contribution of migrants to sustainable development.

We can choose to make labour migration a win-win situation for migrants and host communities. How we, as the international community, develop and help member states implement this compact will be instrumental in determining the future course of labour migration.

Guy Ryder is ILO Director-General.

Every Child Alive: A pledge to all newborns

I will go on clearing the debris with all my strength

From the face of this earth.

I will make this world habitable for this child;

This is my firm pledge to the newborn.

— Sukanta Bhattacharya, *The Testimonial Poet* (Translated by Rini Bhattacharya Mehta)



EDOUARD BEIGBEDER

As a foreigner, I was inspired to read the works of a few great poets of Bengal by the festivities of Bangladesh. For a while, these lines were playing in my mind. Once again, I realised every child's birth is special, be it for the

parents or anyone in the family. From the initial feeling of gaiety, I suddenly started to ponder realistically like any development professional and to contemplate whether we are doing enough to keep these little bundles of joy alive. Are we ensuring safe birth for every newborn and handling them well enough in the aftermath to sustain their lives, even if they are from the under privileged segments of society?

When it comes to newborn deaths, the global trends are alarmingly high, particularly among the world's poorest countries. Global data indicates that 2.6 million newborn babies die every year and the average newborn mortality rate in low-income countries are way higher compared to high-income countries. Newborns from low-income countries are 50 times more likely to die.

Compared to any other low-income countries, no doubt, Bangladesh has done quite well in relation to many development indicators, including its progress in neonatal mortality. A sharp decline is evident from the data: 241,000 newborns were dying in 1990 and then this data went down to 62,000 in 2016.

But the question is whether this progress has been made in all the regions of country. Has its impact reached out to every newborn? A recent UNICEF report reveals that despite well-performing public health programmes, Bangladesh is still among the 10 countries with the highest number of newborn deaths in 2016, and newborn mortality rates. While the number of stillbirth (a baby born with no signs of life at or after 28 weeks' gestation) is even more catastrophic at 83,000 every year (*The Lancet*, 2015).

Looking deeper into the causes, what does it take to prevent neonatal deaths? The answer is simple—affordable, quality care for every baby and mother. Eighty-eight percent of neonatal deaths in Bangladesh stem from highly preventable causes and the fact is, simple solutions like access to well-trained midwives, clean water, disinfectants, breastfeeding within the first hour, skin-to-skin contact, immediate drying, delayed bathing and good nutrition cannot be done without.

But the reality on the ground shows that many places in Bangladesh still lack these basic solutions, leading to the tragic death of many newborns and their mothers. Readiness of the facilities and Essential Newborn Care (ENC) that is vital for newborn survival has low coverage. The facility deliveries have increased, but mostly in the private sector. Often, financial and other socio-economic barriers pose challenges for the poorest of the poor to access essential maternal and newborn care.

Eyeing this situation, UNICEF is launching the new global campaign "Every Child Alive," demanding and delivering solutions on behalf of the world's newborns. The campaign will seek attention of and take on board all the governments, healthcare providers, donors, the private sector, families and businesses to keep every child alive. And most positively, Bangladesh too joins this global call to con-

tain all preventable child and neonatal deaths by 2030.

It is now time to agree and ensure that affordable, quality healthcare, reaches every mother and every baby so that no baby dies of preventable causes. This will only be ensured if we can provide every baby and every mother with a package of four P's: Place (a clean, well-equipped health facility), People (skilled health workers), Products (facilities, drugs and equipment for treating premature and sick newborns) and Power (necessary awareness and skills within communities, women and adolescent girls).

Bangladesh is indeed on the right track, with commitment and strong footing on the ground. To this end, the National Newborn Campaign launched last year promotes affordable interventions at community and household levels, to provide essential care, to all newborns. The government is also prioritising effective interventions for maternal and newborn health, of which UNICEF is a proud partner.

Another major breakthrough and a one-stop-solution to ending newborn deaths in Bangladesh are the existing Special Newborn Care Units (SCANUs) in the public hospitals of 44 districts. SCANUs have positive impact on newborn survival, providing specialised care to newborns suffering from various forms of sicknesses. We hope, the "Every Child Alive Campaign" will expedite the goal of expanding these SCANUs and many more initiatives in the remaining districts in future to reach out to every baby and every mother.

To reinforce our commitment, we must carry on the good work until the figure of preventable newborn death reaches zero. To reach this objective, we must all unite and take the necessary measures required to keep this pledge.

Edouard Beigbeder is UNICEF Representative in Bangladesh.

Government of the People's Republic of Bangladesh
Dhaka Transport Coordination Authority (DTCA)
Road Transport and Highways Division
Ministry of Road Transport and Bridges
Nagar Bhaban (Level-12), Fulbaria, Dhaka-1000
Memo: 35.02.0000.003.32.001.2017-41 Date: 18/02/2018

Request for Expression of Interest (EOI) For Technical Consultant (Transport)

Dhaka Transport Coordination Authority (DTCA) is the Transport Planning and Coordination Authority of greater Dhaka. It has prepared the Transport Master Plan of Dhaka named as Strategic Transport Plan (STP). STP (revised and modified in 2015) is the guiding document for all possible planning and transportation infrastructure development works within Dhaka and adjacent districts. DTCA like to hire a Technical Consultant experienced in urban transport for implementation of Revised STP and related supports.

2. Scope of Tasks/Service

The Dhaka Transport Coordination Authority (DTCA) is hereby requesting proposals for a position of Technical Consultant. The consultant will be exposed to a wide range of public transport issues in Dhaka city and will be asked to provide support to DTCA officials. The selected individual will:

- Assist DTCA officials for technical support, technical analysis, mapping, data collection and presentation, report production and related activities to DTCA;
- Assist DTCA for Revised STP implementation related works and prepare necessary documents;
- Prepare concept and preliminary design of Bus Bays in a Pilot corridor and prepare Bus Route maps;
- Assist to coordinate with other relevant Transport Agencies for information collection, project update, drawing collections;
- Provide administrative support for maintaining the Technical schedule, arranging meetings, translating from Bangla to English, and providing logistical and general office support;
- Attend selected meetings and take notes or assist with presentations; and
- Provide such support to officials of DTCA staff as may from time to time be required.

3. Qualifications

The selected individual must:

- Have at least bachelor degree in Civil Engineering/Urban Planning or Masters in Transport Planning/Engineering and at least five years relevant experience in Urban Transport.
 - Have an understanding of principal urban transport issues, particularly public transport and road traffic management issues in Dhaka and be prepared to work independently to conduct research.
 - Have advanced abilities to obtain and display geographical and other data with high presentation standards.
 - Have strong skills of personal organization and administrative abilities.
 - Have high standards of spoken and written English.
- DTCA now invites eligible applicants to indicate their interest in providing the services. Applicants are invited to provide information indicating that they are qualified to perform the services (complete CV with other details as required as per the Application Forms).
 - Interested Applicants are required to submit their expressions of interest in accordance with the Application Forms and may obtain the Request for Application document from the office of the undersigned during normal office hours or may obtain through email on request.
 - The consultants will be selected using the selection of Individual Consultants procedure in accordance with PPR 2008.
 - The consultancy service will be for 18 man-months and it is expected that the service will commence in May 2018 at Dhaka, Bangladesh.
 - Expressions of Interest (EOI) shall be submitted by 14/03/2018 in sealed envelope sent to the undersigned and clearly marked Expression of Interest for Technical Consultant (Transport).
 - The procuring entity reserves the right to accept or reject all EOIs.

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GD-453

QUOTABLE Quote

VICTOR HUGO
(1802-1885)
FRENCH POET
Music expresses that which cannot be put into words and that which cannot remain silent.

BEETLE BAILEY

BY MORT WALKER



BABY BLUES

BY KIRKMAN & SCOTT

