

## MAILBOX

Please note we have a new email address:  
starweekendtds@gmail.comA country of  
famished farmers

This is regarding an article published in the *Star Weekend* titled "A country of famished farmers" on May 4. Bangladesh is an agricultural country; its economy is highly dependent on farmers. In recent years, we have developed our agricultural technology and achieved self-sufficiency in food. But it is a matter of regret that we couldn't change the conditions of our farmers. They do not get enough price with respect to their costs due to our uncontrolled market conditions. The cultivation cost such as the price of seeds, fertiliser, diesel etc. is increasing day by day. Furthermore, we have insufficient cold storage and limited transferring facility. As a result, every year Bangladesh's farmers incur huge losses even with bumper crops. So, to develop our agricultural sector, I'd like to request the government through *The Daily Star* to take immediate steps to improve our farmers' conditions.

Mohib Billah

Islamic University



PHOTO: TANJIB AHMED

"The clearest way into the universe  
is through a forest wilderness."  
— John Muir

## SNAPSHOT



PHOTO: STAR FILE

## Horrible road safety

I am distraught by the latest news of the deaths of Rajib and Rozina who succumbed to their injuries in gruesome road accidents. Victims of such fatal road accidents regularly appear on social media and newspapers, giving an idea of how horrible road safety is. Drivers can be definitely blamed due to their reckless driving and neglect of traffic rules. But how well have our relevant authorities been able to apply strict rules and regulations for traffic violations? Thus, most drivers aren't conscious of their reckless driving and continue to violate traffic rules in front of law enforcers.

Hardly a day goes by without fatal street accident taking place in some part of the

country and in most cases, innocent people are the victims. Some days ago, *The Daily Star* published the results of a survey of the Passengers Welfare Association which revealed that at least 64 people lose their lives and 150 others get injured across the country every day. People's lives have become so cheap that even if dozens die in a road accident, the government is not bothered. I simply do not understand how the relevant authorities can turn a blind eye to traffic mismanagement when thousands of people's lives are at stake. Road safety is not a privilege, it is right for all citizens of the country.

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The opinions expressed in these letters do not necessarily represent the views of the *Star Weekend*.

## I LABOUR RIGHTS

Last year Dolly Rani was working as a helper at a ready-made garments factory in Jiranibazaar of Savar when the advent of a machine made her useless.

"I used to cut thread," says Rani. She worked in the finishing section, and was one of the women who stood at the assembly line snipping away the loose ends of threads from finished products for hours on end. When the management invested in thread-trimming machines,

A recent study by the Center for Policy Dialogue found that 8.5 lakh exited the industrial sector from 2013-17. The study titled "Role of Women in Bangladesh's Middle-Income Journey" explores how women are faring in the workplace. There is more. Another ongoing study by CPD found that the proportion of women doing garments work dropped from 64 percent in 2015 to 60.8 percent, due to automation of the factories.

family while younger workers replace them," adds Professor Raihan. "The problem however is that new women are not entering the workplace."

He also points out that our RMG industry is dependent on producing clothes which are technologically less complex. "Clothes with variation in design or textures are usually sourced from Cambodia and Vietnam, which have now taken the place of China."

As the factories advance their

"For every jacquard machines in sweater (factories), there are four jobs lost," she adds. "Unfortunately with limited educational exposure, they can at best become supervisors. This is not a position that requires skills of a rocket scientist. So it's easy to train them and on-job training enables them to volunteer for a supervisory role and accordingly the authorities select them and promote them to their next tier." Mohammadi Group's factories, along with others, also participate in a pre-collegiate programme at the Asian University for Women, where each year, a handful of RMG workers are helped to get back to university.

Sabina Yeasmin is one such student in the programme. This former worker of Simba Textiles is now pursuing higher studies and perhaps knows best what kinds of skills training women would

## ARE MACHINES TAKING OVER THE JOBS OF FEMALE GARMENT WORKERS?

## ZYMA ISLAM

the number of people needed to do this job dropped drastically. The machine was faster—with one swipe, the handheld vacuum-like nozzle could trim loose ends quicker than Dolly Rani's scissors and tired hands could.

When she lost her job last year, the middle-aged woman was at a loss. "I have two sons in school and my husband does not do any work. I moved to Savar 11 years ago from my village in Bogura because I was the sole earning member of the family," she says.

"I know of at least four sweater factories that laid off workers in the last few months because they got (electronic) jacquard machines to do the knitting," says Abu Shama Aminul Islam, the organising secretary of labour rights organisation Bangladesh Garments Sramik Samhati. "Each of these machines do the work of eight labourers. One factory got rid of 50 of its workers, for example." He adds that there is actually no real analysis of how many workers lose jobs because of infrastructural changes in the factory.

Luckily, Dolly Rani recently found a job in another factory as a helper in the washing section but she had to endure her wages being cut by a third—she had spent a decade at her last job and was getting up to Tk 9,000 per month; having to start from the bottom again means she only gets Tk 6,000 now.

But at least she found a job. Thousands like her did not.



PHOTO: AFP

"There are two reasons why this happened," says Professor Selim Raihan of the Department of Economics at the University of Dhaka, "one being automation, while the other is the closure of factories that did not meet international standards for doing business."

"Most women have not gone beyond eighth grade, whereas most men have done up to high school," says Rubana Huq, Managing Director of Mohammadi Group. Huq had earlier told *Business Standard* that her factories removed 500 jobs following automation.

technology, the cheap labour of the unskilled female garments worker becomes less and less competitive. The women wither away and out of the picture, but the factories keep running, as robust as ever.

"I finished my HSC and so joined as a junior needlewoman. My job was to decide which machines need what needles, and keep stock of our inventory," says Sabina. Because of her educational qualification she held a higher position than assembly line workers.

"If women who have at least finished school are taken at entry, it becomes easier to move up the ranks. There are

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বিশ্ব বলেছিলো- পদ্মা সেতু 'সম্পর্ক না'  
একজন প্রধানমন্ত্রী আর ১৬ কোটি বাণিজ্যিক বলেছিলাম-  
'কেন না!'

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