

Maltreatment of Bangladeshi workers in Malaysia

What are our authorities doing?

REPORTEDLY, Bangladeshi expatriate workers in Malaysia are being rounded up and herded off to immigration camps at random. According to one victim, expatriate workers having valid work papers are being detained despite the fact that the bulk of them have applied for extension to the Malaysian Immigration Department. They have been thrust into this position because some of the employers have not renewed the visas of Bangladeshi workers. This is compounded by the fact that the extension is taking too long to process. While the Malaysian authorities can and will crack down on the illegal workers, our point is, why are those who have applied for regularisation of work status being treated as criminals? Under any circumstances, maltreatment of an expatriate by the authorities there is unacceptable.

We must stress that these Bangladeshi workers have been working in Malaysia for a long time and have contributed quite significantly to its economy. They deserve better than the treatment they are being meted out, least of all, the despicable, squalid conditions that inmates have to endure at these detention centres which, apparently, lack basic sanitation and are overcrowded. It is our appeal to the new government under Mr Mahathir Mohammad to address this issue humanely.

We are not aware of any action our foreign ministry might have taken with regard to the thousands of Bangladeshis detained in Malaysia. We wonder what steps our High Commission in Kuala Lumpur have taken to engage the Malaysian authorities in a dialogue. We are always beating the drums about the huge sacrifices our workers make in foreign lands to bring in precious foreign exchange. What are we doing in their time of need?

Assault on leftwing protest

Betrays a shrinking political space

WE are appalled by the way police baton-charged left-leaning protesters who were marching toward the office of the Election Commission on September 20, leaving scores injured. The protest was entirely peaceful, yet it was violently dispersed. Such an intolerant approach towards harmless protests runs contrary to the democratic spirit.

As enshrined in our Constitution, people are entitled to protest and ventilate their grievances through peaceful means. One may not agree with everything the other side of the political aisle has to say, but to stifle their voice so vehemently is unacceptable. This only reinforces the claim by opposition parties that the political space has shrunk greatly.

The assault on the leftwing protesters occurred just months before the elections. This begs a question: if one cannot organise political activities now, when should they? Moreover, their views about the Election Commission should be heard. Given that the commission's track record is disappointing, that political parties would try to exert pressure on the commission to make it accountable and effective is only to be expected.

Democracy thrives on dissent and divergent views. It's imperative that we ensure an environment in which people feel comfortable to voice their frustration and dissent, in order to retain our political system's democratic character which has suffered considerable damage in recent years.

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

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Making people obey traffic rules

With police and scout members intervening in trying to bring some discipline on the roads, the traffic situation seems to be improving. However, the fact remains that the traffic infrastructure is too poor for traffic rules to be fully enforced.

For example, while police and scouts are trying to compel people to obey traffic rules, there are not enough footbridges and zebra-crossings for them to use. Therefore, people simply jaywalk. In addition, in many prime locations of the capital, footpaths are simply occupied and thus become unusable for pedestrians. These need to be improved so that people find it easier to obey rules rather than violate them.

Professor M Zahidul Haque, Sher-e- Bangla Agricultural University

UN's Myanmar probe report

I have been taken aback by the United Nation's recent probe report that describes "crimes of the highest order" committed by Myanmar's military forces against the country's minority Rohingya nationals.

The report documented how Myanmar's security forces systematically killed Rohingyas, gang-raped girls and women, and shot and threw children into the river or onto fire. It also described how houses were set on fire with people locked inside.

It's really "hard to fathom" how human beings can be so despicable and gruesome in a civilised world. It is time the world woke up and worked together to hold those responsible—for all that the Rohingyas have been through—to account.

Asst Professor Md Solaiman, Noakhali Textile Engineering College



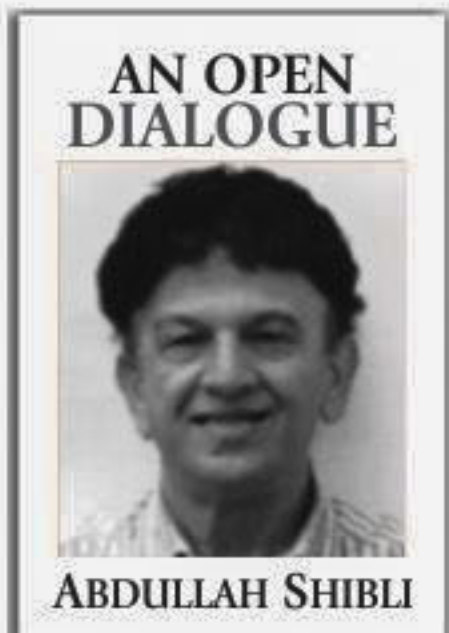
BADIUZZAMAN BAY

BAD news: The law that will dictate your digital life for the foreseeable future is finally here. The parliament on September 19 passed the Digital Security Bill 2018

despite stiff opposition from the journalists and rights campaigners and grave concerns among the public. Good news: Well, at least we now know, with blinding clarity that is, the limits to our digital rights and the extent to which those rights can be exercised.

In Bangladesh, the last session of a parliament is apparently reserved for sneaky decisions and controversial laws, approved rather hastily with the hope that those will tilt the scale in favour of the party in power in the coming election. The government has outdone itself in that respect. In just a matter of hours, it has passed three high-stakes bills with innocuous-sounding titles—Digital Security Bill, the Road Transport Bill, and another recognising the Dawrae Hadith (Takmil) certificate in Qawmi madrasa as equivalent to a Master's degree in Islamic Studies and Arabic—the purposes of which, it would appear, are not so innocuous. The security bill is clearly the most controversial, and will likely have profound repercussions despite assurances from the government that it will not. Its timing is most inauspicious, its background most unfortunate.

There are so many things wrong with this law that it's difficult to decide where to begin. For starters, since its formation early this year, the bill has attracted determined pushback from the journalists, editors and rights campaigners who said that it contradicted the basic principles of the Constitution and would pose serious threats to freedom of speech, especially on social media, and undermine independent journalism. After the draft of the proposed bill was approved by the cabinet on January 29, the Editors' Council expressed its concerns over eight sections (8, 21, 25, 28, 29, 31, 32 and 43) of the bill. Law Minister Anisul Huq, after meeting with the editors, called their concerns "largely logical". According to *Prothom Alo*, diplomats from 10 western countries and the European Union also expressed their concerns over sections 21, 25, 28 and 32, while Transparency International Bangladesh (TIB) called for a critical rethink of nine sections (including the eight objected to by the Editors'



AN OPEN DIALOGUE

ABDULLAH SHIBLI

HOW long will women working the same job continue to earn less, sometimes 50 percent less, than men? And when do we expect this gap to go away? One can only speculate, or build models, to get a clearer picture of trends in future employment, wages and salaries, and working conditions. However, all projections indicate that gender wage gap will persist for a few more decades, and in certain professions and jobs. Many academicians are currently working with data, big and small, to get to the bottom of this issue which has existed for ages and has defied all efforts to lower the gap.

The bottom line is, there is no easy and clear solution because to paraphrase Harvard economist Claudia Goldin, the actual "gender pay gap" is far more complex than that math suggests.

The gender wage gap is the difference between gross average nominal monthly wages of male and those of female employees expressed as a percentage of wages of male employees. In Bangladesh, for the same work, gender pay gap was 57 percent in 2017 and 54 percent in 2016, according to one study.

By and large, women earn about half as much as men in Bangladesh; this gender gap is only exacerbated in the informal market where, for example, a male construction worker can make one and a half times more than his female counterpart. Studies show that a Bangladeshi woman earns on average 77 cents on the dollar compared to men. And again, mind you, we are talking about the same job, working the same number of hours.

Fortunately, all studies also indicate that the gender pay gap in Bangladesh has been going down. A recent paper in *World Development*, an international



Council).

Until September 11—by which time the parliamentary standing committee on the ministry of posts, telecommunications and information technology held two meetings with the representatives of the Editors' Council, BFUJ and ATCO—it seemed as if there would be attempts to bring about the desired reforms in the bill. But the surprising haste with which legislation was followed through, and the fact that the last promised meeting with the representatives of the media bodies was not held, or that none of their major concerns was addressed in the final draft, indicate that those ministerial engagements to assuage fears were merely an eyewash—a shrewd ploy to delay the inevitable until a predetermined point in time.

For those who do not know, here's a quick round-up of some of the controversial aspects of the new law:

Section 43 of the law says that if a police official believes that an offence under the law has been or is being committed at a certain place, or there is a possibility of someone committing crimes or destroying evidence, the official can search the place or arrest the person involved without any warrant or permission whatsoever. Meanwhile, although the now-infamous Section 57 of the ICT Act has been repealed with the promulgation of the new law, its controversial provisions were kept intact and spread out across four sections (25, 28, 29 and 31) of the law.

Equally worryingly, the colonial-era Official Secrets Act was given a new lease of life, meaning if anyone commits a crime or assists anyone in committing a crime under the Official Secrets Act using any electronic medium, he/she will be punished under the new law, with the maximum punishment being 14 years of imprisonment or a fine of Tk 25 lakh or both. It's ironic that a 1923 act would be resurrected to address modern-day problems—that too by a government that prides itself on its commitment to establish a Digital Bangladesh.

In all likelihood, the implications of the new law on our society, political climate and even the individual psyche will be profound and far-reaching. From a pragmatic point of view, how necessary was it really? Posts, Telecommunications and Information Technology Minister Mustafa Jabbar, who placed the bill before the House, called it a "historic" law to be used against digital crimes. He also made a cryptic reference to a "digital war" in the future. "If we cannot protect the nation during this war, and if it endangers the state, the fault will be ours," he said (*Prothom Alo*). Frankly, we're not sure what the minister meant by that. In any case, we're more troubled by the more immediate "war" at hand, in present-day Bangladesh, at the heart of which is a sinister effort to undermine responsible journalism through one law or the other.

The two recent social media-driven movements for road safety and quota reforms have clearly put the government

on the defensive, resulting in knee-jerk reactions tightening the legal noose around social media practices. Apparent in the manner in which unreasonable restrictions are being put on social media is a deep-seated fear that digital platforms such as Facebook may emerge as powerful opinion-shaping tools ahead of the national election, to the detriment of the interests of the ruling coalition. But the actual risk, for those at the business end of this insecurity, is far graver.

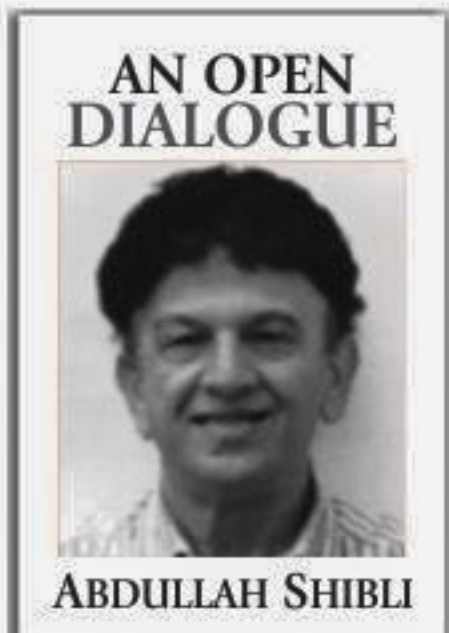
"Due to the inclusion of Official Secrets Act [and other such] provisions, this new law will not only curb freedom of expression but also undermine the objectives of the Right to Information Act. It will also increase the fear created by Section 57," according to Jyotirmoy Barua, a Supreme Court lawyer and activist. "As a result, people will go into further self-censorship" (*The Daily Star*).

Those trying to assure the aggrieved journalists that there is nothing to be worried about the new law are, however, missing a vital point here: It's not just about journalism. When the journalists/activists say they are worried about the law, they don't speak only for themselves but also for the 9.05 crore active users of Internet in Bangladesh (BTRC), whose digital lifestyle and choices will no longer be the same after the enactment of the Digital Security Act 2018. It's preposterous to single out only the more vocal of citizens as victims.

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Why do women get less pay than men?

An economic analysis of the gender pay gap in Bangladesh



AN OPEN DIALOGUE

ABDULLAH SHIBLI

HOW long will women working the same job continue to earn less, sometimes 50 percent less, than men? And when do we expect this gap to go away? One can only speculate, or build models, to get a clearer picture of trends in future employment, wages and salaries, and working conditions. However, all projections indicate that gender wage gap will persist for a few more decades, and in certain professions and jobs. Many academicians are currently working with data, big and small, to get to the bottom of this issue which has existed for ages and has defied all efforts to lower the gap.

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Fortunately, all studies also indicate that the gender pay gap in Bangladesh has been going down. A recent paper in *World Development*, an international

journal, by Salma Ahmed and Mark McGillivray show that over the period 1999–2009, the gap in average wages between men and women decreased by 31 percent and this is mostly due to better education of women and enforcement of laws. Other studies reveal another parallel trend, across all sectors. Women's wages do not rise as much and often fail to keep up with inflation causing a drop in real wages. For example, if the minimum wage for garment workers, mostly women, is raised to Tk 8,000 as proposed, the real income after accounting for cost of living increases will be lower than the increase in per capita income, which almost



doubled between 2013 and 2018.

So, why do women get paid less than men? This question has attracted a lot of attention in international academic literature. Some of the factors include less education, skills, and marriage. However, economists using very sophisticated tools found that 38 percent of the wage gap remains unexplained even when factors such as these are included as "control variables" in the models. In other words, "gender pay gap relates both to women's greater representation in lower-paid sectors such as teaching and health care, as well as the wage differential between women and men in comparable roles."

Three of the most significant contributors to the wage gap are "the penalty women face for becoming mothers, women's lack of negotiating skills and the bias women face from employers," according to Olivia Mitchell of the Wharton School of the University of Pennsylvania. "The fact that such a large percentage of the gap cannot be explained underscores the need for policies directly targeting discrimination in order to completely eliminate the gap," argue economists Francine Blau and Lawrence Kahn of Cornell University.

Measures to minimise the wage gap in Bangladesh include initiatives that have

Chittagong and Narayanganj.

Other initiatives focusing on reducing the pay gap between men and women centre on the appointment of an in-house equality officer and on training employees, creating inequality complaint procedures and treating each case individually to decide if discrimination has occurred because of any requirements inherent in the tasks to be performed.

The Equal Pay Platform launched by ILO and UN Women is promoting awareness of good practices for eradicating gender inequality in wages, including legislation and mechanisms for dispute resolution; measures to advance women's leadership; wage transparency; and access to data on wages and other benefits disaggregated by gender, ethnicity, and migrant status.

While the Sustainable Development Goals 5 (gender) and 10 (equality) address the issue of gender equality broadly, each country must find its own set of measures to tackle gender wage gap. Bangladesh also faces the challenge of inadequate data to track progress on these fronts. For instance, SDG 10.3 requires us to "ensure equal opportunity and reduce inequalities of outcome, including by eliminating discriminatory laws, policies and practices and promoting appropriate legislation, policies and action in this regard." But this indicator will be difficult to monitor if we do not have adequate data as the Government of Bangladesh's self-assessment study reported last year. Nonetheless, campaigns to promote education and awareness can remedy some of these shortcomings, too. Bangladesh in collaboration with UN Women can strengthen the latter's advocacy campaign, "Stop the Robbery", which calls for equal pay and women's economic empowerment as part of achieving full gender equality.

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