

Are high-quality roads too much to ask for?

Remove inefficiency in road construction

WE agree with roads and highways officials and experts who have recently said that the lack of proper road infrastructure is a major hindrance to Bangladesh becoming a developed country. It is a known fact that the cost of per kilometre road construction in Bangladesh is the highest in the world while the quality of roads being constructed is extremely poor. Not only that, many of the existing roads are in an abysmal condition despite so much money being spent on maintenance. In the last nine years, according to a leading Bangla daily, Tk 11,000 crore was spent on maintenance of roads and a whopping Tk 46,500 crore has recently been allocated for the same purpose. Despite thousands of crores of taxpayers' money being spent on road maintenance, 4,750km of roads remain in bad condition.

Poor planning, design, implementation and use of low-quality materials, among other things, are largely to blame for the sorry state of our road infrastructure. And we hope that the authorities understand the various implications of the lack of proper road infrastructure. Firstly, this is costing us potential foreign investment. Secondly, how can we expect to continue our growth momentum without proper road infrastructure and adequate road network? Bangladesh needs 80,000km of roads whereas currently the road network constitutes only 21,000km.

How much longer are we going to keep wasting public money in the name of cost overruns and project delays instead of addressing the myriad systemic flaws, i.e. improper planning and design, inefficiency in project implementation and rampant corruption? Furthermore, the fact that roads are being constructed upon political considerations does not help. It is time that policymakers realised the need to put public interest first and began addressing these issues because at the current snail's pace of development of road infrastructure, our growth momentum may be difficult to sustain.

Put workers' safety first

Stop such risky practices

A photo published in *The Daily Star* on September 24 depicts how unaware our workers are about their own safety. In the photo, a man is seen working on the power lines standing on a transformer, completely oblivious to the risks of accidents that might happen anytime and least bothered to put on his safety gear lying idly on the ground. Such practices are commonplace in the country because workers are neither made aware of their own safety nor are they provided with proper training and equipment. Also, there is a lack of oversight of the authorities concerned.

According to Bangladesh Occupational Safety, Health and Environment Foundation (OSHE), at least 1,242 workers were killed across the country in 2017 due to lack of occupational safety in the workplace. Some of the reasons behind the workers' deaths and injuries were electrocution, fire, falling off rooftops, boiler and cylinder explosions, etc. Thus it is clear that most of these accidents could be avoided if better working conditions could be ensured and the workers provided with proper safety gear and equipment.

Moreover, when a staff member from a government agency (as is the case here) violates the rules by not wearing safety gear, the person and the agency involved must be held accountable and punished. Since we do not hold them accountable for these violations, such risky practices go on. This daily has regularly been publishing photos of hazardous working conditions that our workers are exposed to in order to create awareness among the workers and the authorities concerned. But sadly, we do not see any improvement of the situation. Workers' safety must come first.

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

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Minimum call rate hurting the poor

Because of rapid advances in technology, human beings are becoming increasingly connected at a pace never seen before. Technology is affecting everyone's life, and the same is the case for us here in Bangladesh.

At this time, the government's decision to increase call rates of all telecom operators makes no sense. Before this increase, the industry was very competitive as each company tried to convince customers to use their service by providing them with some very good offers.

This increase on the other hand has increased the cost of using cell-phones for customers significantly and so it is difficult to understand why the government would take such a decision. The only ones who would benefit from this are telecom companies.

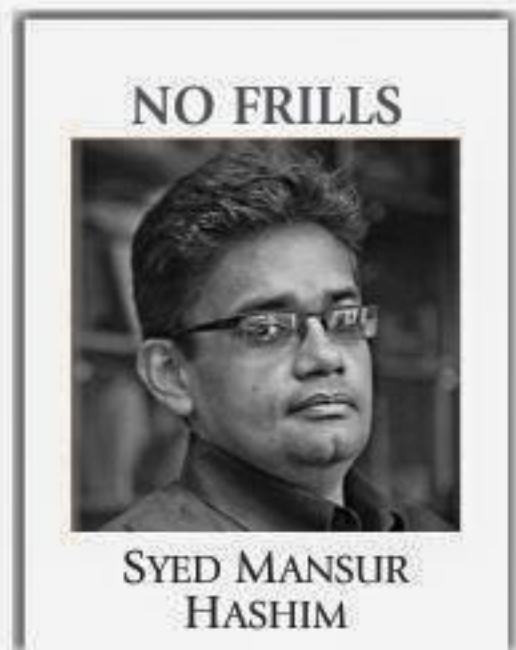
If the government was truly concerned about public interest it ought to have set a maximum call rate, not a minimum call rate.

As a result of the government's decision, people with lower income will now have to suffer. It seems as if the government, in collusion with telecom operators, have come to an agreement that runs completely against the interest of ordinary citizens.

And the biggest losers from this, again, are those who are the poorest.

Md Tarek Aziz Bappi, Dhaka University

Who will run our energy sector?



NO FRILLS

SYED MANSUR HASHIM

THE latest edition of *Energy & Power* magazine has covered a very important aspect of the country's power and energy sector. The present government has undertaken massive projects to meet power generation progressively for 2021, 2030 and 2041. That vision envisages 60,000 megawatts (MW) power generation capacity by

2041, where coal-fired power plants will produce 22,000MW. While all the attention has been on the infrastructure development side, we are yet to see any meaningful roadmap for the development of human resources to man these huge projects.

If we look at just the coal aspect, the government will need to import 66 million tonnes of coal every year to generate 22,000MW. Given our recent experience of the mysterious circumstances under which approximately 140,000 tonnes of coal disappeared from Barapukuria coal mine and the subsequent chaos it caused, have we any idea about what will happen when we start taking in the millions of tonnes of coal that will be imported every year, in the coming decades? Some experts have voiced serious scepticism about the viability of setting up an import terminal in the coastal corridor and then using river routes to transport coal to power plants. We only have to look at the number of sunken vessels carrying on our rivers over the last year to get an idea about the dangers involved. What will happen when the traffic increases a thousand-fold?

Moving on to the actual power plants; every power company will have to develop a pool of highly trained and skilled manpower who will be involved in the entire supply chain (import of coal—transportation—handling of coal from port to power plant). Where is this pool of Bangladeshi technicians? Our educational institutions, particularly the universities that are offering courses are hopelessly outdated. The offered syllabi are often distant from the industrial requirements. Hence, the graduates from our universities are not able to fulfil the needs of the industry. In fact, it is not just the power or energy sector that is suffering from a mismatch between what is needed and what our graduates are being taught. All the major industrial sectors like the textile industry and apparel industry are run by foreigners. What a complete waste of financial resources! I have covered the story of the apparel/textile industry in an earlier article and there too it was pointed out that the government gets zero revenue as income tax while thousands of our graduates don't get these jobs because they are deemed to be unqualified to get the job done by industry.

This is something the policymakers need to ponder



PHOTO: AFP

upon today and not 10 years down the line. Once contractors have finished building their plants, their experts will leave and we will be left high-and-dry with no option but to hire foreign experts. And if foreign consultants run the show, the administrative overhead will shoot through the sky and those costs will inevitably be passed on to consumers. We are not providing the young educated people with the skills that the job market needs. Although we have such a massive unemployed population, we are not training up our own manpower. Instead, employing massive numbers of foreign workers and these are not just top management. Our factories are forced to employ even mid-level managers and technicians because our graduates are not up to the job.

Needless to say, we are headed for a rude awakening very soon! Is it not the government's prime duty to fill this gap in knowledge and expertise? And keep the money in the country? For energy sector training, there is a PSC fund. It has been massively misused for trips of top officials and their minions. Primary energy sector development could have happened, if this was used productively. Instead, it has gone to complete waste. If only a fraction of the money spent on worthless trips abroad was spent on skills development, we could have built up the requisite technical people base by now.

We have been sending at least 1,000 people per year for the last 10 years for skills development. So, ideally, we should be having at least 10,000 people in our industry. Where are they now? A large percentage has emigrated, and, sadly, the same person has gone on

multiple trainings. So, what is the purpose of such training? Where is the focus? There is no database of who is going for training. Does the government have any "needs assessment" system in place to determine who needs what training? Are we sending deserving candidates to get training? A case in point would be the recent team that went to Vienna to attend IAEA conference: 19 people went including the concerned minister, secretary, directions, etc.—full house went. Indeed, a photograph of the event was published in *Dainik Ittefaq* this month showing that some of our esteemed Bangladeshi delegates were busy taking photographs. It must have been a good photo shoot. Even Russia didn't send 19 people. Some of these foreign trips have become pleasure tours. The whole idea of "training" has changed.

As stated before, the time has arrived for policymakers to wake up and smell the coffee. We need to work on our education system and technical training institutes. We need to have a pragmatic "needs based" assessment system that will send the right personnel to the right type of training and finally, we need to devise a retention plan to hold on to those personnel who have received these trainings abroad. The power and energy sector will require thousands of skilled technicians and professionals in the coming decades and they must be Bangladeshis, not Sri Lankan, Chinese, Pakistani, Indian or Russians! Our energy sector has to be manned by our people, period.

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

SEXUAL HARASSMENT IN PUBLIC TRANSPORT

Women-only bus is not the solution



TAQBIR HUDA

EARLY in June this year, a women-only bus service named Dolonchapa was launched by Rangs Group in Dhaka with a view to giving women a "safer" and "easier" travel option (*The Daily Star*). This initiative came against the backdrop of rampant sexual harassment of women in public transport. A recent

BRAC study found that 94 percent of women in Bangladesh face sexual harassment when commuting by public transport. The study identified three major causes of such sexual harassment: lax implementation of laws, overcrowding in buses and lack of absence of monitoring (such as through closed-circuit cameras). Owing to such prevalent sexual harassment of women in public transport, this private initiative—the first of its kind in Bangladesh—promises to address the growing need for "safe public transportation for women". As such, it has been recognised by the stakeholders and commentators as a sort of victory for the women commuters of Dhaka and a milestone in the fight against sexual harassment. It has been also heralded as a temporary reprieve for the countless women who are tired of facing sexual harassment in their daily lives. But let us be clear here: this is by no means a step forward in the battle against sexual harassment nor is it a feasible solution since it does not address (much less resolve) the underlying cause of the problem to begin with.

Firstly, measures such as the introduction of women-only buses target women, the victims of sexual harassment, and seek to change how they conduct their lives, rather than focusing on men, the perpetrators of sexual harassment, and preventing them from committing the act in the first place. This is because the sex segregation model of fighting harassment posits that it is women

who have to take themselves out of the spaces shared by men or risk suffering the consequences. Therefore, it places the onus on women to "avoid getting sexually harassed" while granting impunity to the actual sexual harassers. Thereby, it treats sexual harassment as an inevitable social menace that women must circumvent rather than something that men could be taught not to do.

Secondly, it does not actually make women safer. Sure, it may "prevent" individual cases of sexual harassment for a small number of women "lucky" enough to avail themselves of such services, either because they can afford to pay the higher price or because the buses just so happen to cover their required route. But the fact remains that such services will simply not reach the vast majority of women commuters and that it leaves untouched the very root of the problem. By focusing on women's conduct instead of addressing lewd male behaviour, the sex segregation model of fighting harassment only works to embolden the harassers and worsen the problem in areas where such segregation does not exist, considering the fact that we cannot feasibly hope to ensure gender segregation in all aspects of public life (nor should we).

For instance, if a woman travelling by an ordinary bus complains about being sexually harassed, the introduction of women-only bus services allows the harassers to respond by saying, for example, "if you don't like it here, why don't you travel by a women-only bus?"

Thirdly, and perhaps less obviously, such private initiatives, in a sense, commodify female trauma and evince that ostensibly "social welfare" initiatives can be quite profitable private ventures themselves. A handful of women I surveyed, who regularly use public transport, responded that they would be willing to pay three to four times the amount of a regular bus fare if it meant that they could have a sexual harassment free experience. This is precisely where the trouble lies: why are these women willing to pay three to four times the

Employing women in areas which are traditionally male-dominated goes a long way in challenging deep-seated misogyny and works to change our perceptions of women's role in public life.

regular fare for essentially the same service (i.e. a trip from Point A to Point B)? This is because something as fundamental as a woman's right to be free from sexual harassment has in reality become a market-priced luxury that can be packaged and sold to a certain class of women who can afford to pay the price. Women whose socioeconomic backgrounds do not afford them the opportunity to purchase this luxury will simply have to make do with what they can afford.

What is further regrettable is the fact that even the one scope of women's empowerment available in such initiatives was left unused because the drivers of these female buses will be male. At least in Egypt, when they introduced women-only bus services, it had a modicum of empowerment as even the bus drivers would be female. This is important because employing women in areas which are traditionally male-dominated goes a long way in challenging deep-seated misogyny and works to change our perceptions of women's role in public life.

For these reasons, I cannot stress enough that the introduction of women-only buses does not solve the sexual harassment epidemic. If anything, it only serves to normalise it. It does not empower women, rather it commodifies their trauma and capitalises on it. Therefore, this is not a success story—this is an admission of defeat; an admission of the fact that we as a society have failed to teach men that women have a right to travel in buses without being sexually harassed. It adheres to the overarching social dictate that "boys will be boys", so if women want the luxury of commuting without being sexually harassed, then it is they who should take themselves out of ordinary buses and travel by a special kind of bus instead.

Let us open our eyes to the reality that such feel-good initiatives create the illusion of problem-solving without actually even addressing the problem. Therefore, our acceptance of such initiatives should be conditional upon their being recognised and implemented as temporary band-aid solutions while the actual, long-term solutions are also underway.



PHOTO: RASHED SHUON

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