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# Implicated under Section 57

Police must ensure charges against road safety campaigners are not framed on flawed grounds

WHILE it is good to know that the police have finally submitted the charge-sheet in a case filed against four road safety campaigners in Chattogram last year during the nationwide road safety movement, there remains some confusion regarding the reasons why they were implicated under Section 57 of the ICT Act in the first place. On August 6 last year, after foiling a protest rally organised by a group of young people via social media during the demonstrations for safe roads, the Kotwali police arrested these four youths. Later, police filed a case under Section 57 of the ICT Act against the four, accusing them of provoking students by spreading false information on social media and tarnishing the government’s image by sharing anti-government updates and quotes.

While the police said that they implicated the four students under Section 57 as evidence against them was found of posting anti-government status updates on social media platforms and instigating students to create disorder, according to the accused students, the allegations brought against them were totally baseless. One of the students told *The Daily Star* that the anti-government status updates based on which the police framed charges against them were posted from their Facebook IDs after their arrest. If that is really the case, then the question is: who updated their status on social media after their arrest? While we think that the numerous cases filed against students during and after the road safety movement should be disposed of quickly, as the cases are hampering their regular educational activities, we also hope that no student will be falsely implicated because this will ruin their future, to say the least.

# Why have DNCRP drives been put on hold?

Such a move goes against public interest

IT is quite confounding that the drives carried out by the Directorate of National Consumer Rights Protection (DNCRP) recently, with the aim to identify the hospitals, dispensaries and diagnostic centres charging people more than the government-declared fees for dengue tests and selling medicines for mosquito control at very high prices, have been brought to a pause for reasons we fail to understand. During the last two weeks, the DNCRP drives resulted in many hospitals facing fines ranging from Tk 40,000 to Tk 1 lakh. According to a DNCRP official, “a verbal order from the high-ups” resulted in the drives being suspended and a director of the organisation said that the decision came from the commerce ministry which DNCRP falls under.

While a senior secretary to the commerce ministry said no directive to the DNCRP has been given to suspend the drives, he stated that the ministry voiced concerns about inspections interrupting services at the hospitals because they are time-consuming and that this is something DNCRP officials should keep in mind. Regardless of whether or not the DNCRP was verbally ordered to put their drives on hold, the fact remains that DNCRP officials have not been seen conducting drives in the last few days.

The fact that the DNCRP drives have reportedly been put on hold at a time when the number of dengue cases has reached an all-time high in the country’s history, is bemusing. At the end of the day, the drives were in public interest and acted as a possible deterrence to hospitals and clinics—many overflowing with dengue patients—exploiting ordinary people, particularly the poorer sections of society. Furthermore, we find little merit in the argument that the drives can hamper hospital services because they are “time-consuming”. How lengthy can these investigations be whose aim is to simply identify if customers are being over-charged, and fine the relevant hospitals? Especially if steps are taken to ensure hospitals cooperate with investigations, there is no reason why the latter should take up time and interrupt medical services.

The move to suspend DNCRP drives at a critical time such as this—when the country is experiencing a public health crisis and when there is more scope for hospitals and dispensaries to exploit patients—only serves to protect corporate interests. The DNCRP drives should be resumed at the earliest.

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

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Dengue epidemic taking huge toll on people’s lives

Only a few days are left till Eid-ul-Adha and people have begun to go back home. But this time, instead of joy, their hearts are filled with fear and anxiety because dengue has turned into an epidemic. It may strike anywhere, anytime—people are at their wit’s end.

We are baffled by the attitude of some of the concerned authorities who have tried to downplay the severity of the actual situation. Such rhetoric, however, cannot hide their inefficiency and lack of foresight which are largely to blame for dengue getting out of control. The real figures of those who have been afflicted by the disease and those who have died are likely higher than what the media reports have been saying.

To remain safe people must take all the precautions necessary, including keeping their surroundings clean, and remaining alert at all times.

Nur Jahan, Chattogram

# Despite progress, young Bangladeshi women are still lagging behind

NUSRAT JAHAN

BANGLADESHI women have come a long way in terms of economic and social empowerment. Yet beneath these encouraging statistics, we find some unexpected anomalies that call for serious attention.

Let us start with some positive statistics. Starting from a very low base in the early 80s, today girls are at par with boys in completing education up to higher-secondary level. Before the days of RMG, women’s participation in the formal economy was minimal and their back-breaking work in the informal economy was invisible. Capitalising on the abundant female labour force, Bangladesh has become the second-largest RMG exporter in the world. Women’s labour force participation more than doubled in the last couple of decades.

Bangladeshi women are not only progressing on the socio-economic front, they are also dominating the political arena. They have been filling prominent leadership positions—notably that of prime-minister—for the last three decades. The country ranked fifth in the 2018 Global Gender Gap Index (GGI) on closing the gap in political empowerment. In fact, Bangladesh ranked 48th in the overall GGI ranking across the spectrum of economic, educational, health and political empowerment indicators, just above the US and way ahead of all other South Asian and most African nations.

So, at BRAC Institute of Governance and Development (BIGD), when we wanted to get some insight into the thoughts and aspirations of the Bangladeshi youth, as well as their readiness to embrace the world of opportunities offered by the 21st century, we hoped to find young women moving forward with young men from a close distance, if not hand in hand. But, to our surprise, we find that they are still falling far behind young men.

In our nationally-representative survey, among the youth aged 15-35, we see that up to higher secondary level, young men and women indeed have equal completion rates across all socioeconomic classes, including the extreme poor. But how much of this achievement is translating to other indicators of empowerment?

Compared to their male counterpart, fewer young women, across all levels of

education, say they are confident about their English language and computer skills—two most sought-after capabilities for better jobs. Female youth are also far less confident that their education will help them get a job.

Among those who have completed their education, young women are much less likely to be involved in earning activities than young men. We achieved gender equality in education up to higher-

Stark economic disparity between men and women is not uncommon across the world. But with so many powerful female leaders in the country, we wondered, do young Bangladeshi women feel empowered? Our survey was especially interested in the youth’s perceived freedom of choice, not just because it is a basic human right, but also because it is closely related to an individual’s sense of agency—the subjective experience of controlling



secondary level through incentives such as stipends. Indeed, three-quarters of the young women we surveyed have between primary and higher-secondary education, but their involvement rate in earning activities is the lowest. In this group, only 25 percent participate in earning activities, compared with 90 percent among young men with similar levels of education, about a third among women with low or no education, and almost 60 percent among women with higher education.

As we see, young women with higher education almost close the gap with young men in earning involvement. But only four percent young women study beyond higher secondary level; the rate is seven percent among young men.

one’s actions—and consequently, one’s motivations and behaviours.

In our survey, much higher rates of young men, compared to young women, reported enjoying freedom of choice in all crucial aspects in life—choosing educational institution, occupation, friend and spouse, freedom of physical movement and spending money. And, we see the starkest difference in case of freedom of physical movement; only 40 percent young women believe they can move freely, half as much as young men.

Lack of freedom in physical movement for young women is particularly troubling. As we have seen already, young women are lagging far behind young men in the most important aspects of life—higher

# Do world leaders understand the consequences of the climate crisis?

QUAMRUL HAIDER

SINCE the Industrial Revolution, we have created a hodgepodge of human systems that are at odds with natural systems that support them. In the process, we are pushing billions of people into a dystopian future by bequeathing them with a climate crisis.

While schoolchildren worldwide are on the streets protesting government inaction and millions are displaced by climate-induced disasters, the laissez-faire attitude of our leaders, save a few, sends the message that the current upward trajectory of the crisis does not seem to be a pressing problem. Instead, those who resist the powerful that are savaging our ecosystems and driving people off their land face death and fear, according to the latest annual report from Global Witness.

At various conventions and Conference of Parties (COP), discussions on climate change resemble the tale of a group of blind men touching various parts of an elephant, each arriving at a very different conclusion of what it is like. To one it is like a tree, to another a snake, to a third a wall, to the fourth a spear, so on and so forth. A wise man tells the group that an elephant has all the features they mentioned, but they are missing the big picture. The moral of the parable is that we have a tendency to project our partial experiences as the whole truth, contrary to what reality is. Thus, just like the blind men, politicians and world leaders are missing the “big picture” of human-induced climate change.

Scientists have been warning since the 1980s that to limit the most damaging impacts of climate change, strong policies are needed to limit greenhouse gas emissions. Ignoring their warnings, politicians allowed greenhouse gases to build up to potentially dangerous levels in the atmosphere. The reason: most likely their lack of knowledge about climatology—a multidisciplinary subject requiring insights from astronomy, biology, botany, chemistry, cosmology, economics, geology, history, oceanography, palaeontology, physics and statistics, among other disciplines. One wonders, how many of them or their advisors have mastery of more than one or two of these disciplines.

Eventually, in 1988, the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) was formed by the United Nations Environmental Programme and

World Meteorological Organization to play a leadership role in tackling climate change. That said, instead of setting the agenda on global climate, IPCC has become a political body controlled by a few powerful nations that are also the biggest emitters of greenhouse gases. Other nations that claim to be victims of climate change, yet emit carbon dioxide in copious amounts or build coal-fired power plants near huge carbon sinks or open up rainforests for mining, are third world and developing countries lacking a government strong enough to enforce any measures.

Failing to find a one-size-fits-all solution to counter climate change has prompted IPCC to water down the global climate target in the hope of getting some

the elusive white whale. Hence, there are ample reasons to believe that the agreement is not going to effect any meaningful change in global warming.

So far this year, more than dozen conferences and symposia on global climate change were held in different countries. These conferences, including COP24 last year, dealt with adaptation measures only, which are needed to respond to climate change that has already occurred. However, are there any plan(s) for the future when our planet might become close to uninhabitable? Can we expect an answer from the “political climate pundits” when they will meet in New York and Santiago (Chile) later this year?

While we are waiting for an answer,

education and skills and participation in the economy. Being able to move freely is essential for women to access education, training, social network and employment. And physical mobility is exactly where young women are struggling the most.

In 2015, Bangladesh was elevated to the category of lower middle-income countries. But we have a long way to go; still, almost a quarter of the Bangladeshis are poor and 13 percent are extreme poor. In this long quest for prosperity and equity, our youth should play the main part. When half the population, our young women, are lagging far behind, this process would neither be fast enough, nor equitable.

So, what can we do?

First, it is imperative to investigate: i) why the educational achievements of women—up to higher secondary level—are not translating into jobs; and ii) why the rate of pursuing higher studies is so low among young women despite better earning prospects. Our data suggests early marriage may be a reason. 62 percent of married female youth got married before turning 18 and, among the early-married youth, less than one percent studied beyond higher-secondary level and most of them are engaged in household chores. It indicates that early marriage is not just harmful for women’s physical and mental health, but it also smothers their economic and educational potential.

Second, we also need to think about how we can ensure safety, security and comfort of women outside the home. In our survey, sexual harassment and rape were mentioned by majority of young women as a major problem in our country. Violence against women in many different forms is frequently featured in news headlines. So, one reason for the restricted mobility could be the feeling of insecurity among young women. But further research on this matter to identify the root causes and taking necessary action is crucial. As mentioned before, this is not just a basic human right, but also crucial for women to becoming productive citizens of the country.

Women are supposed to hold up “half the sky”. But how can they do that when they fall so short?

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Schoolchildren play on melting ice in the climate change-affected Yupik Inuit village of Napakiak on the Yukon Delta in Alaska.

PHOTO: MARK RALSTON/AFP

sort of an agreement. Consequently, it is no longer pushing for binding commitments to reduce emissions, whether for developed or for developing countries. Furthermore, the widely publicised pledge of giving developing countries billions of dollars to cope with the effects of climate change is essentially relabelling foreign aid already going to those countries. Besides, in countries where corruption is endemic, how much of the money, though laughably inadequate, is used for adaptation is questionable.

One could argue that the 2015 Paris Climate Agreement hammered out at COP21 was the first step towards solving the problems resulting from climate change. Regrettably, that first step has so far been Captain Ahab’s “Moby Dick”,

global emissions of carbon dioxide are at a record high, with no signs of slowing. The atmosphere is warming, glaciers are melting, permafrost is thawing and seas are rising. Extreme weather is bringing floods, storms, droughts and other disasters to every region of the world. Moreover, climate change is creating problems in almost every aspect of our life, from public health to food security, from water availability to the economy, and much more.

If greenhouse gas emissions continue to rise unchecked, repercussions of climate change are going to be profound in the future. They would destabilise governments, produce waves of refugees, flood most of the world’s coastal cities and most importantly would make continuing degradation of the Earth irreversible.

Extinction Rebellion claims that their failure in addressing the climate crisis makes them guilty of “criminal inactivity.” It is, therefore, obvious that to keep our planet inhabitable, we need leaders with fortitude, wisdom and acumen, leaders who are not beholden to “corporations financing the injustice of climate change,” and more importantly leaders with vision to guide us through what, by all accounts, will be some challenging decades ahead.

Suffice it to say, should we falter in dealing with the challenges of climate change head-on, not only will the universal goal of peace and happiness for humankind slip out of our grasp, but man’s struggle for mere survival will also be jeopardised.

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