

# Putting an end to modern-day slavery

TAUSIF SANZUM

I must have been 15 years old when I heard my mother say, at a family gathering, that one of the biggest reasons why she missed Bangladesh was the existence of "buas" who would do all the housework while she took a break. Growing up in Kuwait, I did not understand the significance of her comment then. It took me seven years of living in Bangladesh and another three outside the country to call this institution a form of modern-day slavery.

## One form of modern-day slavery

Rashida, a 30-year-old domestic worker who has worked in Moghbazar (Dhaka) for the last 15 years, says that if she could go back, she would have tried to finish her studies and find a job.

The legal age of employment in Bangladesh is 14. However, 12 and 13-year-old children are permitted to do "light work". The definition of light work is kept vague and children can easily be exploited as the law does not prohibit their employment in informal economic sectors or specify the number of hours that they can be made to work. It is common practice in a big city like Dhaka for people to ask their relatives in small towns and villages if there is a little boy or girl from a "poor family" who they can bring to their house and train as full-time "help".

In the face of extreme poverty, parents give up their children so that they can go to the big city and at least have a roof over their heads and some food. However, these children are left completely at the mercy of their "owners". According to a study conducted by Ain o Salish Kendra (ASK),



According to a 2006 baseline survey by the ILO, there are about 420,000 child domestic workers in Bangladesh whose 'employment' usually borders on indentured servitude.

PHOTO: STAR

between 2008 and 2011, there were 2,709 reported incidents involving violence against domestic workers, 729 of which led to the death of the child domestic worker.

Physical abuse is not the only form of violence that they face; mental and verbal abuse of children reportedly is also rampant. These children have no access to education which limits their career opportunities and cripples them economically for life. This system can be looked at as tantamount to being a form of modern-day "slave trade".

According to the Bangladesh Labour

Force Survey (2013), there are 10.5 million domestic workers in the country. Ninety percent of them are girls and young children (Bangladesh Free Trade Union Congress).

## Dehumanisation of domestic workers

Khadeja came to Dhaka in search of a better life from a small town in Jessore and ended up becoming a domestic worker. Her husband has remarried and she is now the sole earner in her family which comprises her mother and son. She wants to send her son to a school but has been forced to enrol him in a madrasa because she cannot take

care of him all day, and since madrasas have accommodation facilities. She works from 7am till 4pm, runs back home, cooks for her mother and then goes to work again from 6pm to 9pm. She works for five households and on average, does three chores in each house, namely, mopping and sweeping floors, washing clothes and cooking. She earns Tk 8,000 every month, and struggles to make ends meet after paying Tk 4,000 for the tiny room that she rents in a slum.

In most houses where she works as a cook, they check to see if her nails are dirty, asks her if she washes herself properly after going to the restroom and at times, accuses her of stealing food while cooking. Incidents such as these are common and have been normalised in the Bangladeshi "master-slave" relationship.

Nahar, another domestic help who works regularly for 11 hours, says that when she first started working as a domestic worker, she didn't like it. However, over time she has accepted it and learnt to like her work despite her gruelling schedule.

The "buas", as they are commonly referred to, are mostly made to use separate cutlery for eating/drinking, a separate bathroom, and in case there is only one bathroom, are asked if they cleaned it properly after using it. The "maids" are usually never allowed to sit and eat with the "malik" (owner), and if they live inside the house, sleep on the kitchen floor.

On average, a domestic worker works 10-12 hours per day and earns a monthly wage of Tk 1,000, which is less than USD 12 (Bangladesh Free Trade Unions Congress).

## When the system fails

Sarah Habib has two "maids" in her house;

one has been living in her house for the last nine years and the other comes every morning and works for 1.5 hours. She believes that in a literal sense, "buas" are not modern-day slaves as there are laws to protect the rights of citizens in general and as such, one cannot crudely impose ownership rights upon them. But one cannot overlook the circumstances in which house helps become vulnerable and victims of violence. Their wages are often withheld, and they don't have the agency to report wrongdoings. The class disparity between the help and the "owner" feeds into the power-play involved in their subjugation.

In 2015, the cabinet adopted the Domestic Workers Protection and Welfare Policy to improve the working conditions of domestic labours and address the issues of child labour. Even if there is a law in place, it wouldn't help in improving the conditions of domestic workers if it is not enforced by the government and most importantly, if the mindset of the general populace does not change. They have to recognise that "buas" are not slaves who they can treat any way they want. They are a part of the workforce and their rights have to be respected.

We can start by addressing domestic workers by their name and with proper respect. While the word "bua" means sister and was originally used as a term of endearment, it has come to describe an occupation that carries a derogatory connotation. Maybe we can begin our fight against this modern-day "slavery" by referring to our domestic workers by a term/name which puts them on an equal footing with us.

Tausif Sanzum is a US-based Bangladeshi journalist.

# Recommendations for the Green Climate Fund

## POLITICS OF CLIMATE CHANGE



SALEEMUL HUQ

LAST week the Green Climate Fund (GCF) held a weeklong Global Programming Conference at its headquarters in Songdo, Korea, with over five hundred participants from all over the world. The GCF has recently appointed a new Executive Director, Yannick Glemarec, and is also developing its new strategy and seeking replenishment after the first tranche of USD 10 billion runs out in a year.

I spent the week in Songdo talking to the new Executive Director and many of his colleagues at the GCF Secretariat, as well as to many delegates from the Least Developed Countries (LDCs) in particular.

I had been a frequent critic of the GCF in the past, not because I am against the GCF; rather because I have been disappointed by the slowness of its work and its failure to channel funding to the most vulnerable communities in the most vulnerable countries, despite the GCF board having made the laudable early decision to allocate half their funds for adaptation and prioritising the LDCs and Small Island Developing States (SIDS).

I was very pleased to see that my observations have also been repeated in the recent report by GCF's own Independent Evaluation Unit (IEU), whose recommendations have been adopted by the GCF board at its last meeting.

I am sharing below some ideas and offering collaboration to help GCF fulfil its mandate with regard to supporting the most vulnerable communities in the most vulnerable countries going forward.

I will couch them in response to the four main recommendations made in the IEU report.

## Increasing the role of direct access entities

The GCF has been allocating a significant amount of its funds through multilateral entities towards developing countries.



Participants pose for a group photo at Green Climate Fund's Global Programming Conference, in Korea.

PHOTO: GREEN CLIMATE FUND

However, one of the principles which the developing countries fought for and was adopted in GCF's design was to allow direct access to national entities as well as multilateral entities. The progress on accreditation of national entities has been fraught with difficulties and hoops that the applying entities were made to jump through just to be accredited, followed by another set of hoops to actually get funding. Thus it has taken years to get even a small number of national accredited entities.

This has been a major flaw in both the design and implementation process in the past and I hope it will be streamlined going forward. One solution might include setting different levels or duration for getting accredited.

Until every developing country has enough national entities accredited, they will not be able to reap the benefits of GCF support at the scale that is needed to tackle climate change.

## New strategic plan that positions GCF as a thought leader and

## policy influencer and establishes its reputation in innovation and addressing country needs

When it comes to adaptation practice and adaptation funding, the GCF has a long way to go if it wants to be a thought leader. There is a very strong adaptation science community globally which is working and learning about the basics of adaptation. They arrange a major global conference every alternative year called the Adaption Futures Conference, which will be held next in Delhi, India in 2020.

At the same time, the community-based adaptation (CBA) programme has also grown over the last 15 years and organises a conference every year. The 13th conference was held in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia in April this year and the 14th will be held in Bangkok, Thailand in June 2020 and the 15th in Dhaka, Bangladesh in June 2021. The GCF should actively participate in these events where adaption thought leaders come together and share their views.

The other element in this

recommendation suggests GCF needs to focus more on creating and monitoring impact of the projects which are being funded by them. This is a major design challenge for the GCF whose only tool until now has been funding limited-time projects which it receives from countries and later it is left in a tangle of unrelated projects that don't add up too much.

The GCF board must give the secretariat flexible resources to proactively engage in some more strategic level monitoring, evaluation and learning (MEL) at country level over time periods of 10 years and more, which is when post-project climate change impacts are expected to become more noticeable.

A good way to do this would be to partner with a university in each country (that can then be networked together to develop common methodologies) as well as existing networks of universities and think-tanks.

If GCF wishes to demonstrate longer-term, post-project impact at national level, such a long-term partnership with "learning Institutions" will be a good idea.

## The GCF should re-emphasise its support for adaptation investments

This has by far been the major failure of the GCF to date regarding the volume of money allocated to adaptation (which should have been half the portfolio but was only a third), and reaching the most vulnerable communities.

It is good to see that the GCF has now prioritised both the LDCs and SIDS and held special sessions for each group in Songdo, last week. It is crucial that GCF also plans with them longer term collective engagement programmes (as opposed to only country-by-country and project-by-project approaches, which are in practice now).

With regard to global funding for adaptation, the GCF has to remember that it is not the only fund in town; there are the Adaptation Fund (AF) and the LDC Fund (LDCF) managed by the GEF who have a longer and more effective track record. So from the perspective of the LDCs, the GCF must improve and enhance its performance on adaptation funding if the LDCs would support its replenishment. A good way forward would be to join forces with the LDCF and AF to find synergies and gaps. My own view is that GCF's comparative advantage would be in scaling up successful adaptation activities funded by other funds, rather than replicating what they are doing.

## Recommending a greater delegation of authority that emphasises responsibility, agency and speed in delivering country climate needs

This focuses on developing longer term in-country strategic planning and capacity building to tackle climate change on the ground with adaptation as well as mitigation, e.g., by supporting projects that enable renewable energy in support of adaptation at community level.

In this regard, a good way forward would be to enter into strategic partnerships with a few (front runner) LDCs to take this devolution of decision-making to the national level.

Saleemul Huq is Director, International Centre for Climate Change and Development at the Independent University, Bangladesh (IUB).

## ON THIS DAY IN HISTORY



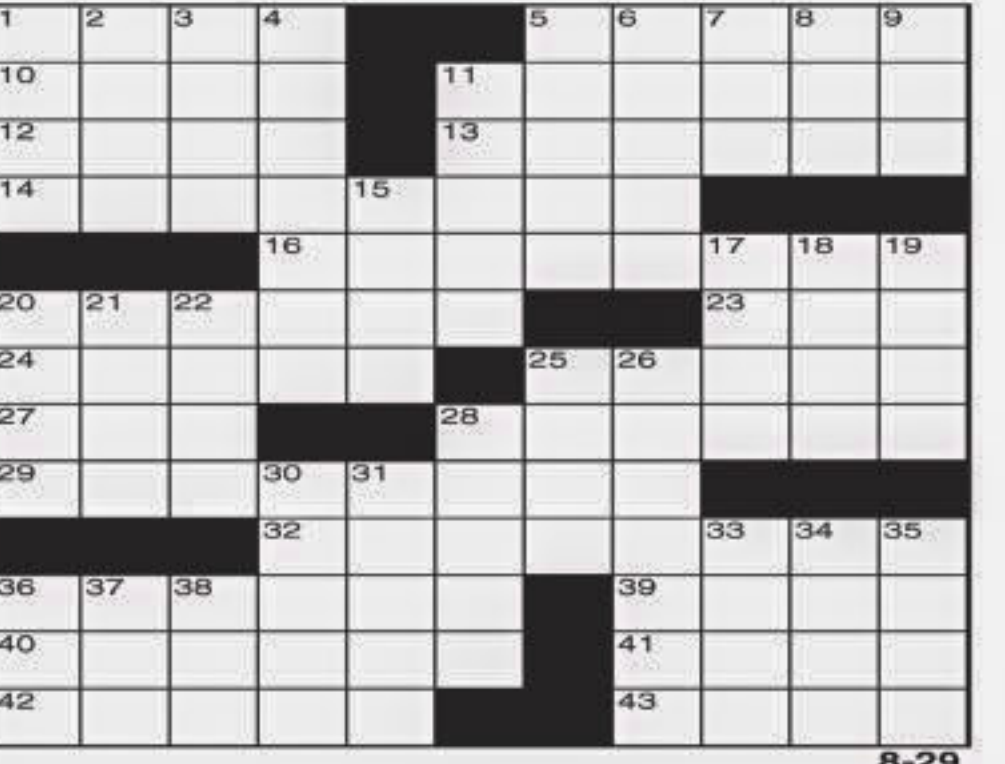
AUGUST 28, 1963

Dr Martin Luther King, Jr, gives his "I Have a Dream" speech at a civil rights rally in Washington, DC

The speech was delivered during the "March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom", in which he called for civil and economic rights and an end to racism in the United States. More than 200,000 people attended.

## CROSSWORD BY THOMAS JOSEPH

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  - 25 Baseball's Pee Wee
  - 27 Braying beast
  - 28 Backed
  - 29 White House section
  - 32 Highway stop
  - 36 Stately dance
  - 39 Gather
- DOWN**
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  - 2 Donut feature
  - 3 Avenue liners
  - 4 Level
  - 5 Resort spot
  - 6 Useful skill
  - 7 Drill part
  - 8 Wallet bill
  - 9 Wallet bill
  - 11 Action film staple
  - 15 Mint product
  - 17 Not new
  - 18 Diamond corner
  - 19 Took in
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  - 38 Modern



## YESTERDAY'S ANSWERS

A M I D M I S S  
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 M E A N S T I D E S  
 A X L E C E D E

## BEETLE BAILEY

by Mort Walker



## BABY BLUES

by Kirkman & Scott



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