

Focus on skills is the right approach

But fix the direction of higher education also

IT was a matter of delight that Dhaka hosted a three-day conference on the theme "Future of Entrepreneurship Education and Experiential Learning: Determinants of Developing Successful Entrepreneurial Eco-System in Asian Economies". Daffodil International University deserves congratulations for organising the event in collaboration with the Association of Private Universities of Bangladesh.

One of the essential messages that emerged from the conference, attended by representatives of universities from 15 Asian countries, was the need to develop students with the adequate knowledge and skills to meet the variegated demands of the society. And nobody can agree more that the focus on skills development is the right way to go.

However, in this regard, there are a few issues that we feel merit consideration by the relevant quarters. Firstly, it is essential that we determine the direction of higher education in our universities. While education has a universal meaning and objective, which is to prepare a person for meeting their responsibilities towards the society along with securing means for their sustenance, the objective of the higher seats of learning in any country should be oriented towards meeting the needs germane to that particular country. It is time to assess whether the large number of private and public universities in Bangladesh are actually fulfilling the country's requirements.

And that brings us to the question of the quality and cost of higher education. If the employer is not happy with what she/he is getting out of a Master's degree holder, then there must be something wrong with the quality of teaching. For example, there are a large number of universities that run higher courses on business administration, yet we hear business houses complaining of not getting the quality they would like. Where are the lacunae? And this leads one to ask whether the quality of teaching is commensurate with the cost.

We couldn't agree more with the education minister that there should be more collaboration between industries and academia to address the problem. We urge the education minister to facilitate an interface between the business houses and the universities, both public and private, to address these very questions.

Will winter vegetables become out of reach too?

Prices of essentials must be stabilised

WHILE consumers are still reeling from the shock of the skyrocketing price of onions, despite supplies coming in from abroad, now they are faced with another rude awakening. Vegetables, especially the ones that are usually abundant in winter, have become very expensive. According to a report in this daily yesterday, apart from old potato and papaya, no vegetable could be bought below Tk 40 in weight or in piece. Cooking spices and other essentials such as rice have also experienced price hikes. For people from lower-income groups, buying food items has become very stressful as they are being forced to significantly cut down or do without certain items that are becoming out of reach. We understand that a shortage of supply has led to the abnormal prices of onions but why have other essentials such as vegetables been affected too?

According to a wholesaler quoted in a report, vegetable cultivation has suffered due to rainfall in October and Cyclone Bulbul earlier this month. While climatic factors will always play a role in cultivation, we cannot help but wonder why this apparent shortfall in supply of vegetables has coincided with the hike in the price of onions. Other wholesalers have said that the recent transport strike, during which covered vans were kept off the roads, caused a temporary shortage as vegetables could not be transported to the capital.

It goes without saying that nutrition is significantly compromised when people have to cut down on essentials like vegetables, which are often the only items (besides rice) that people from lower-income brackets can afford. Over the years, the prices of meat and fish have consistently gone up making them luxury items for the poor. This month, there were reports of the price of rice being hiked by rice mill owners.

Clearly, despite the government's efforts, prices of essentials are far from stable, which places unnecessary hardship on the people, most of whom have fixed incomes. We urge the government to take steps to keep prices of essentials, especially rice and vegetables, stable by making sure that they are not artificially hiked up by syndicates of unscrupulous middlemen and traders—which is usually the reason for this inflation. For the long term, cultivation of these items should be increased by more state support of farmers and ensuring that they get fair prices for their produce and grains.

Child brides: Tales of robbed childhood and shattered dreams



TASNEEM TAYEB

A CLOSER LOOK
CHILD marriage is an aberration that has permeated the boundaries of nationality, religion and race. Be it in Africa, Middle East, Latin America or Asia, child marriage nips the dreams of young girls in the bud.

One in five girls in the world are married off before they reach 18, as per data by a global partnership organisation called Girls Not Brides, which works to end child marriage. More than 650 million women alive today had been married off when they were children. And more than 150 million girls will be forced into child marriage by 2030.

The situation in Bangladesh is no different. According to Unicef, Bangladesh has the fourth highest rate of child marriage. The first three positions have been secured by impoverished African countries: Niger, the Central African Republic, and Chad. Unicef further states that between 2005 and 2013 in Bangladesh, 29 percent of girls got married before the age of 15 and 65 percent married before they reached the marriageable age of 18.

These numbers are staggering and expose the dark underbelly of a major social problem that we are facing today, both at a global and local level. And while we know that this is a problem, and enact laws to prevent it, what we don't ask ourselves is why this is happening. Or do we?

Our basic instinct is to blame the patriarchal, feudal mind-set that tends to see females as inferior beings—economic and social burdens, who should be married off soon. And true it is. But there are other factors that lead to child marriage which do not surface in popular discourses on this subject.

Poverty is a major reason that encourages child marriage. If one looks at the trend, they would notice that child marriage is more prevalent in underdeveloped or developing countries. Financial constraints and shortage of food often lead parents to marry off their girls at an early age. Moreover,

younger girls, who are considered more attractive and have a higher reproductive lifespan, require comparatively less dowry. Therefore, poor parents are more prone to marrying off their girls at an earlier age. According to Girls Not Brides, the "median age of marriage for girls living in the poorest households of Bangladesh is 15, compared to 18 for those living in the richest households."

Climate change is another factor that triggers child marriage. Often, fear of river erosion and floods sweeping off one's abode and lands, economic problems due to water, land and resources shortages

globally girls aged 10-14 are five times more likely to die during delivery than mothers aged 20-24; girls aged 15-19 are still twice as likely to die during delivery than women aged 20-24."

This is just one aspect of the multifaceted problems posed by child marriage. The physical pain and psychological trauma of marital rape on the girls leave them emotionally scarred for the rest of their lives. And of course, child brides are most often subjected to battery and domestic abuse at the hands of their much older husbands and in-laws. Having no means to support themselves

upon by the traffickers who lure them into prostitution. And in the many legalised brothels of Bangladesh, these girls are raped—day in and day out, 10 to 12 times a day sometimes—by their customers. These girls perish in their windowless rooms, hoping to save enough money to buy their freedom someday.

According to the *Foreign Policy* report, in Bangladesh, a "country with the highest rate of marriage involving girls under the age of 15 in the world, and where 150,000 to 200,000 children and young women have been trafficked into prostitution, the two forms of abuse [child marriage and forced prostitution] are tightly intertwined."

And in order to address the latter, the former needs to be stopped first. The government has taken many commendable steps to address the problem of child marriage—the country, in line with target 5.3 of the Sustainable Development Goals, has committed to eliminate child, early and forced marriage by 2030. It ratified the Convention on the Rights of the Child in 1990 which sets the minimum age of marriage at 18; enacted the Dowry Prohibition Act; and inked many policies that discourage and criminalise child marriage. However, its incorporation of a special provision allowing child marriage in "special cases" in the 2017 Child Marriage Restraint Act has overshadowed all the positive steps it had taken earlier to prevent and stop child marriage. Especially because, the act does not define what constitutes a "special case".

This regressive policy has put the future of all our girls at stake, made them more vulnerable to the curse of child marriage, because now anyone can concoct a "special case" and justify child marriage. This one step has regrettably taken us back centuries, and no matter how much we beat the women empowerment drum, it will not be possible for us to end violence against women or truly empower them, unless we can rescue our girls from the spiralling trap of child marriage. It is high time the policymakers revisited the policy and made the necessary amendments in order to truly make it pro-girls and pro-girl-child-empowerment, rather than making it an essential loophole for the criminals who rob our girls of their childhood, their dreams and aspirations.

Tasneem Tayeb works for *The Daily Star*. Her Twitter handle is: @TayebTasneem



Bangladesh has the fourth highest rate of child marriage.

PHOTO: STAR

which lead to poor harvesting, force families to marry off their girls, while still financially capable.

Lack of education among the parents is also a reason. With no knowledge of what child marriage does to a girl—physically, psychologically and emotionally—parents fail to realise the dark pit that they are pushing their girls into in the name of marriage.

And with child marriage come the repercussions. For one, it severely damages the reproductive health of girls, putting their lives at risk during childbirth. According to a 2015 Human Rights Watch report, "research shows that

and no financial freedom, these girls are left to suffer silently without emotional counselling or access to healthcare.

Child marriage poses another threat for these young, vulnerable child brides—a threat that is more sinister and menacing: trafficking and prostitution. Often these child brides are sold off by their husbands to *dalals* or traffickers, who in turn sell these girls to brothels. *The Telegraph* and *Foreign Policy* have printed in-depth stories that shed light on the complexity of this problem.

The girls who try to run away from their husband's house, in desperate attempts to escape domestic violence, are also preyed

The Rohingya Quandary

Children must not be punished



MANZOOR AHMED

THE Rakhine State of Myanmar was historically the Arakan Kingdom, a prosperous state spanning western Burma to parts of the Chittagong Division. The Arakan Court is famously known for patronising the most prominent 17th-century Bengali poet, Syed Alaol (c. 1607-1673), well-known for his masterpiece, *Padmavati*, a translation of a Hindi epic poem *Padmavat* by Malik Mohammad Jayasi.

Arakan was conquered by the Burmese Konbaung dynasty in 1784, then ceded to the British as war reparation in 1826 after the first Anglo-Burmese war. When the British annexed all of Burma in 1886, the Arakan province became part of the Province of Burma under British India. Burma, including Arakan, also known as the Rakhine province, was split off from British India in 1937. After 1948, Rakhine became part of the newly independent state of Burma.

During the Second World War, Muslims known as the Rohingyas, inhabiting Northern Rakhine, fought the Japanese on the promise of autonomy by the beleaguered British colonial rulers. Others, mostly Buddhists, supported the Japanese. At the end of colonial rule in 1948, Myanmarisation, or a push for a majoritarian nationalism, despite the existence of some 130 ethnic minority groups in the country, led to a civil war in parts of the country.

In 1973, the military rulers led by General Ne Win declared Arakan as the homeland of the Rakhine people. However, the new dispensation did not recognise the Rohingyas, the majority in Northern Rakhine, as a distinct ethnic community. The 1982 Citizenship Law of Myanmar barred Rohingyas from citizenship. The Muslim Rohingyas were seen, defying history and geography, as intruders from Bengal, and even the label "Rohingya" was banned from the official lexicon.

The authoritarian military rulers looked for legitimacy in people's eye by stoking emotions based on religious-linguistic-ethnic jingoism. This naked populism planted and nurtured the seeds of xenophobia and hate that flourished on a fertile ground.

The leaders of the democratic struggle against the oligopoly of the armed forces, including "the democracy icon" Aung San Suu-Kyi, in their political calculation, found it profitable to cast the Rohingya people as the enemy. A potent element in the brew is the economic and geo-

political interests of both China and India which supersede human rights and humanitarian considerations.

China is now Myanmar's largest investor as well as its biggest trade partner. China's ambitious Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) includes plans for huge investments in deep sea harbour, road and rail link and export zone along the Rakhine coast of the Indian Ocean.

India has a common border with Myanmar in India's sensitive north-east region. It is a contender for economic and political ties with Myanmar. This explains the hands-off stance of the two powerful neighbours of Bangladesh on the Rohingya issue and their failure to put any effective pressure on Myanmar.

The Myanmar authorities have been

against individuals for crimes against humanity, but it is a long-drawn-out process, and again enforcement would be difficult without Myanmar's compliance.

Aung San Suu-Kyi herself is reported to be planning to take the lead in the defence team at the ICJ case. She apparently intends to double down on justifying the case for ethnic cleansing.

The efforts in diplomacy, legal steps and mobilising international support must continue. But all indications are that Myanmar has no intention to restore conditions that would allow the Rohingyas to return to their homeland. Bangladesh is in the Rohingya quandary for the long haul.

One important issue facing the Rohingyas in Bangladesh is the future of

with other aid-providers.

For Bangladesh government's policy response, the lead has been taken by the foreign ministry officials concerned with political and security imperatives, rather than those with knowledge of children's education rights and needs. Instead of a systematic education programme spanning pre-primary to secondary, only an "informal" education programme has been permitted to be run by aid agencies.

Anxious parents and educated people among the refugees, including teachers, have tried to fill the gap by opening their own "unofficial" schools in the tents where they live. The teachers include some who have Bachelor of Education degrees and were high-school headmasters and teachers in Myanmar.

The schools teach subjects like English, Burmese, mathematics, and history. Some teach science and social science subjects to older students. The teachers say, they try to follow the Myanmar curriculum in the hope of helping students keep up with schooling back home.

But only about 10,000 children are beneficiaries of the makeshift schools, according to the *New Humanitarian* report, out of many times more who could benefit. These receive no support or encouragement from the authorities and aid agencies are not permitted to assist the Rohingya volunteer teachers.

Rohingya parents who spoke with the *New Humanitarian* noted the contrast between the authorised NGO learning centres and the refugee-run classrooms. They would rather send their children to proper schools where the children would be taught the subjects taught in a school.

Alice Albright, Executive Director of the Global Partnership for Education, a multilateral education fund provider, visited the Rohingya camps in September. In a meeting with the Ministry of Primary and Mass Education on September 12, she praised the humanitarian response of Bangladesh government and the host communities. She also warned about "a lost generation of children without education opportunities, without hope, and without a pathway to the future."

It is difficult to understand how proper education opportunities for the Rohingya children can be an obstacle to whatever geo-political resolution that may be struck eventually. Proper education is the least that can be done for the children traumatised and deprived of their basic rights. It would enhance Bangladesh's image as a humane nation. The children of the host communities who are paying a high price due to the refugee crisis should also benefit from the education services for children.

Manzoor Ahmed is Professor Emeritus at Brac University.



Rohingya refugee children at a makeshift toy shop at the Kutupalong refugee camp in Cox's Bazar, on August 22, 2018.

PHOTO: REUTERS/MOHAMMAD PONIR HOSSAIN

success in pursuing an ethnic-cleansing project over the last three decades. It has driven out most of the estimated three million Rohingyas. Only about 10 percent—around three hundred thousand—still remain in Rakhine. Persecuted, thrown out of their homes and devoid of normal livelihood, they live in internment or prison-like conditions.

Diplomacy has failed to persuade or put enough pressure on Myanmar to budge from its denial of citizenship rights to Rohingyas and create the conditions for their return.

Initiatives have been taken to bring the complaint to the International Court of Justice (ICJ) of the United Nations and the International Criminal Court (ICC). The ICJ can hold states liable for their action, but has no means of enforcing its verdict. The ICC may pass judgement

their children. Fifty-five percent of the camp residents are children under 18. As children, they are claimants to specific rights of safety, protection, wellbeing and education under international treaties, such as the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child.

How are the children in the camps doing in respect of education services? According to the *New Humanitarian*, which tracks and reports on the situation of refugees: "Aid groups have set up more than 2,000 'learning centres' for children (aged) 14 and younger, but instruction in these classrooms has mostly been limited to playtime, or basic reading and numeracy." (November 12, 2019). And even these classes do not reach a third of the roughly 416,000 school-age Rohingyas, according to Unicef, which coordinates the camps' education services

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

letters@thedailystar.net

Prevent drug abuse

Drug abuse by the young people has reached an alarming stage. Many young students reportedly turn to drugs as soon as they get into colleges or universities. Particularly, Yaba is quite popular with a section of the students. I think one of the reasons why they turn to drugs is that they think doing drugs will earn them an acceptance within certain groups, and that is a horrible tragedy.

Despite the government's ongoing drive against drugs, the supply chain remains unaffected. We must address this problem. Equally importantly, the government and the authorities of educational institutions should conduct regular programmes to make students aware of the many dangers of drugs.

Hossain Abu Musa, Chattogram