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People continue to die on the roads

Do the authorities care?

IS the administration concerned about road accidents? It would seem not. Road accidents, unfortunately, have become quite a norm in Bangladesh given that hardly a day passes without some grim stories and pictures in the media of road accidents and the death and destruction that they wreak. The last day of February witnessed road crashes in four districts resulting in the death of 16 people, including seven from a family in one road crash alone. Of the dead, five were SSC examinees.

Only those who use the roads to travel, particularly outside of the capital, would know how terrifying an experience it is. The already unsafe roads are made even more unsafe by drivers with wanton abandon, served by a sense of impunity, dilapidated, unfit and unauthorised vehicles/contraptions, and absence of regular and strict monitoring by the police. It is a pity that despite the cavalcade of accidents and deaths, we do not find any noticeable action by the administration to ameliorate the situation. On the contrary, the situation is getting worse every day.

The statistics is very disturbing. Death toll in road accidents in 2019 exceeded the previous year's by nearly 18 percent, with more deaths and injuries as a consequence. We have fared even worse so far in 2020, considering the statistics we have of January this year. Reportedly, in January alone, at least 445 people were killed and 834 others injured in 340 road accidents across the country.

It appears the suggestions of the experts from time to time have fallen on deaf ears. It's a pity that the reactions of the authorities are episodic. Only when there is a public uproar, as we saw initiated by the students in 2018, do we see the police, the BRTA and other related agencies sit up. But eventually, it peters out primarily due to lack of commitment. The new road transport act became effective more than a year after it was passed but that, too, after some of the provisions were diluted to meet the demands of the owners and workers. Even that is not being implemented effectively, however. Nothing short of action on a war footing can reduce the procession of deaths on the roads.

Negligence of authorities ruining Sonadanga Bypass Road

A constant calamity for commuters

A recent report published by this daily revealed that Sonadanga Bypass Road, the main way leading in and out of Khulna, is in a dilapidated state because the concerned authorities have paid no attention to the dire condition it faces. With hundreds of vehicles plying the road on a daily basis, the bypass must bear the onslaught of cars, buses and commuters, the combination of which far exceeds its capacity. And in the absence of a footpath, thousands of pedestrians risk their lives trying to make their way along the thoroughfare, contributing to the chaos.

Since its completion in 2013, no repair work has been done at all. Even the asphalt on the road has eroded overtime. To make matters worse, cluttered bricks and stones along with a myriad of potholes—full of mud during monsoon or dust otherwise—are now a trademark of Sonadanga Bypass Road, with occurrences of multiple minor accidents on a regular basis. Why then this indifference from the concerned authorities?

There is really no excuse for this total lack of maintenance work of a road that is so vital for safe, efficient movement of vehicles and people. The government should exert pressure on the Roads and Highways Department (RHD) to prioritise the maintenance of a road as crucial as the one in question. It is a matter of concern that there are many roads and bridges all over the country that are also in a bad condition, adding to the road crashes that are taking precious lives every day. Around 25 percent of the country's roads under the Road and Highways Department are in "poor, bad or very bad" shape, according to an RHD survey conducted on 17,452 km of roads last March. Clearly, the RHD is well aware of the situation and should repair these roads on an urgent basis.

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

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COVID-19: We must stay alert

The rate at which the virus COVID-19 is spreading is nothing short of alarming. We have seen how countries around the world have taken precautionary measures to prevent the virus from infecting their respective citizens, but to little avail so far. The coronavirus pandemic is now a staple topic in everyday news, as the global death toll continues to ascend with no sign of improvement whatsoever.

From what I see on social media, normal life is slowly ceasing to exist the way it used to wherever COVID-19 is taking over. Till now, many of the developed nations have not been able to contain the situation, and the very thought of the virus entering Bangladesh, which I think is inevitable at some point in the future, makes my blood run cold. With India and some other neighbouring countries already facing it, I think it is only a matter of time before we do, too.

But how will we deal with it? Recently, I noticed during my travels that the airport authorities in Dhaka have taken only some very basic precautions and many from the now-infected countries were coming into our country. I urge the government and medical authorities to stay alert and prepare for a likely spread of the virus on our land.

Meem Morshed, *Dhaka*

PR And Marketing

Factories need to grasp the nettle

RMG NOTES

Mostafiz Uddin

NEVER underestimate the power of marketing and PR. At present, there is a huge disparity in the global apparel industry in terms of who is doing what with regard to sustainability. Some brands are doing a lot. Some brands are doing a little. Some brands are doing nothing at all.

And yet, who, if they are honest, can tell the laggards from the leaders? As a factory owner, I know the difference, of course. I know who is walking the walk and who is talking the talk. I also know that sometimes there is a world of difference between what brands say in public and what occurs behind the scenes.

But do consumers know? I suspect most consumers cannot tell the difference between a laggard and a leader. My point is this: PR and marketing are key to our industry. It's amazing what can be achieved with a well-formulated public relations strategy. It's amazing how perceptions can be changed, how weaknesses can be glossed over and small victories painted as grand achievements.

The global apparel industry is brilliant at this. To offer a few examples, it has managed to convince much of the Western press that recycling and closing the loop is massive in our industry when, in reality, recycled collections are still few and far between—and often only small runs. It has also managed to convince the world that it has made great strides on the issue of sustainability when the reality is that the whole industry is still moving far too slowly in this regard and, in practical terms, not that much has changed in the past decade.

Most brands and retailers manage to paint a positive picture of their work. But what about their suppliers? What about Bangladesh's RMG industry? First, the good news: I know for a fact that the RMG industry has made massive progress in recent years in terms of safety, environmental compliance, and corporate governance. Our factories are safer than ever. Many of them use sophisticated effluent treatment technology, which means they are no longer polluting national waterways and have introduced brilliant water and energy saving techniques to make them more efficient. They have invested in green technologies for developing more LEED factories than any other country in the world.

Yet do they get the credit? Of course not. Any that credit there is goes to brands which shout out that they are supporting renewable energy and other projects in their supply chains (which factory owners fund). Meanwhile, the only time we hear about RMG suppliers is when something goes wrong—when workers are striking, when there is an accident or when there are factory closures.

We are seriously missing a trick here. I have touched on this issue briefly before, but it really does need to be repeated: we have to change the narrative, we have to get smarter, and we have to start altering the conversation around supply chains. There is an important reason for this.

Supply chains will be the big focus for apparel brands and retailers moving forwards. Why? Because, most major brands have set targets for the reduction of CO2 emissions and these targets are often linked to the requirements of the Paris Agreement.

Consider that 90 percent of emissions take place in supply chains and it becomes very clear how heavily the spotlight will fall on Bangladeshi RMG factories moving forward. The world will be watching. Brands—and their own consumers—will become more and more interested in what is actually happening in supply chains, about how their clothing is made, and the impact of clothing production on the environment.

As individual factories, in fact, as a whole industry, we need to get better at explaining what we do and the progress we have made, which is considerable. We need to expand our capacity to offer clear information to industry stakeholders (which include the whole apparel value chain), telling them how our work is helping to reduce emissions. And remember, it is we as factory owners that are helping reduce emissions and create a more sustainable apparel industry—not brands and retailers. We are the ones making the investments and changing the way we work, so we need to take credit where it is due.

From a PR and marketing point of view, we need to grasp the nettle on these issues and begin seriously fighting our corner. Our customers are brilliant at presenting their sustainability achievements in the best possible light, often taking the plaudits for work done by suppliers. It's time for us to turn the tide.

Our factories should be better equipped to communicate what we do and the progress we have made, especially in terms of reducing emissions in the apparel industry. STAR FILE PHOTO

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Generation Equality: Four ways to accelerate progress

Jemimah Njuki

THE global gender community will meet in New York in the second week of March to review progress on gender equality and women's empowerment in the 25 years since the Beijing Declaration. The theme for this year's UN Commission on the Status of Women gathering is Generation Equality, emphasising how the current generation must close the gender gap.

Examples of gaps include how women's representation in national parliaments is only 23.7 percent. In 39 countries, daughters and sons do not have equal inheritance rights. In 49 countries, there are no laws protecting women from domestic violence, and globally 750 million women and girls are married before the age of 18. In the agriculture sector where I work, women are just 13 percent of agricultural landholders globally.

While the UN hopes these kinds of gender gaps can close in a generation, analysis by the World Economic Forum in their Global Gender Gap Report 2020 sets different expectations. The report says it will take 99.5 years to close the gender gap if we accelerate progress, but if we continue the current pace, it could take up to 257 years. This is alarming.

While numerous development actors are engaged in projects around the globe that seek to achieve gender equality and empowerment of women and girls, governments and other agencies need to act fast and at scale to accelerate progress to ensure generation equality.

First, there needs to be political commitment by governments across the world to address gender inequality and women's political participation. This can be in the form of women's representation in parliament, gender-responsive budgeting or advancing policies that protect the rights of women.

By February 2019, only 12 countries—led by Rwanda with 61.3 percent—had over 40 percent representation of women in parliament. The proportion of ministerial posts held by women, however, remains low, at only one in five. France, Canada and Spain, and more recently Scotland, have all had cabinets with at least as many women as men.

Equal political participation by women and men needs to be the norm rather than the exception. Strategies that have worked include quotas for women's representation, reforming pollical parties to be more gender equal, and ensuring a level playing field for women political aspirants.

Second, governments need to accelerate laws that protect the rights of women and girls. Without these laws, the efforts of organisations will not be sustainable as they are not protected under the law. Evidence shows that discriminatory laws still exist in many countries.

For example, the Women, Law and Business report 2020 shows that 90 out of 190 countries still have at least one restriction on the jobs women can hold. In terms of laws to redistribute women's care work, more than half of the economies covered paid leave specifically reserved for fathers, but the median duration of that leave is just five days.

Only 43 economies have paid parental leave that can be shared by mothers and fathers. This is despite research showing that law reforms and policies that empower women are not only good for women's economic empowerment, but they also boost economic growth.

For example, when women can move more freely, work outside the home and manage assets, they're more likely to join the workforce and strengthen the economy.

Third, we must address the harmful social and cultural norms and societal perceptions of women as laws by themselves are not enough in protecting the rights of women. Evidence from Bangladesh, for example, shows women who routinely wore burkah/hijab, and hence are more compliant with religious and cultural norms, are less likely to be engaged in outside work.

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While some progress has been made in addressing gender inequality, a big push is clearly needed in this last decade before the expiry in 2030 of the Sustainable Development Goals. PHOTO: REUTERS

In Kenya, while equal inheritance of land and other property is entrenched in the constitution, women own less than 7 percent of the land in the country, mainly due to cultural norms that still do not recognise the rights of women and girls to inherit land.

Engaging men, boys, traditional and religious leaders can change norms and practices that are harmful to women and girls. In countries like Zambia and Malawi, traditional chiefs have been instrumental in reducing forced and early child marriage.

And finally, we must invest in research and evidence to test what works, where we are making progress and where progress is not happening so as to inform future action. While there are indicators to track progress, the analysis of what is working in different contexts to achieve gender equality is not always that robust.

Tools like the Women's Empowerment in Agriculture Index track women's empowerment in agriculture and show the impact of different interventions on different indicators of women's empowerment. Analysing data used to track SDG 5 on gender equality to assess what is working and using the lessons for future implementation can help to accelerate progress.

While some progress has been made in addressing gender inequality in recent years, a big push in this last decade before the expiry in 2030 of the Sustainable Development Goals is clearly needed. Now we must use different tools than those that created the problem.

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