

Former Tazreen workers deserve fair recompense

Why do they still have to agitate for what they are rightfully owed?

THAT former workers of Tazreen Fashions Limited would have to agitate for fair compensation even after eight years since a fire ravaged the factory, killing over 117 workers and permanently disabling many others, is a damning indictment of the true state of Bangladesh’s apparel industry. While the authorities shamelessly advertise the success of this industry, about 45 workers have been silently and helplessly protesting on the sidewalks outside the National Press Club for 70 days now. They wouldn’t leave the premises until their demands of dignified compensation, rehabilitation and justice are met. These demands are by no means unfair, nor impracticable, yet beyond a cursory visit by the representatives of BGMEA and the Department of Inspection for Factories and Establishments (DIFE), nothing has been done to address their grievances.

The apathy with which their demands have been treated is not surprising, given how often it happens to victims of workplace accidents and mass layoffs in Bangladesh. But this tactic of totally refusing to acknowledge them, without so much as a meaningful contact from the authorities, boggles the mind. Why has no one reached out to negotiate their terms? Can a government simply ignore the existence of a section of its citizens? Is it some unholy test of their endurance? The workers say, of the 173 injured workers listed for compensation, only 45 got some kind of financial support. The number is far less than the official count of workers said to have received compensation—and the amount received is a pittance at best. Although labour activists have long demanded that the compensation for permanently disabled workers be equal to their lifetime’s earnings, as per the Bangladesh Labour Act, the amount of compensation is only Tk 1 lakh in case of death, and Tk 1.25 lakh in case of permanent disability—one of the lowest in the world.

It is high time the legal provisions for compensation for deceased and injured workers were reformed in line with the gravity of their loss. Many of the former Tazreen workers were the sole bread earners of their family, and they have been living a miserable life since the accident, unable to find work or retain their jobs for long because of their invalidity. Those “lucky” enough to have received some compensation saw it wither away, as is only natural, while those who caused their sufferings through their negligence or complicit silence are being let off the hook. This cannot go on any longer. The government must take the responsibility of these workers and ensure they receive proper compensation, rehabilitation and medical treatment. And those responsible for their sufferings must be brought to book.

Antibiotics losing efficacy

Random and indiscriminate use should be checked

ONE wonders whether we are looking at an impending health crisis, with the most effective medicine that we have known to fight bacteria of various classifications well-nigh becoming ineffective due to their random and indiscriminate use. It has been more so during the Covid-19 pandemic, which saw increased consumption of antibiotics as a quick fix against a hitherto unknown virus. It is feared that most of the nearly one crore people in Bangladesh who had suffered illnesses that mimicked Covid-19, took antibiotics and other drugs. One wonders what we might face in the future if 17 antibiotics are losing their efficacy against the 10 types of illnesses caused by bacterial infection. In future, we will have been left with only three drugs to fight bacterial diseases. These fears are based on extensive studies carried out by specialists and specialised institutions.

The health ministry and relevant administrations should explore the reasons for the situation coming to such a pass. They must take heed of the findings of the National Technical Advisory Committee on Covid-19 and ensure that all protocols related to the treatment of the pandemic are followed. One of the reasons for the quantum rise in the use of antibiotics is the violation of this protocol. Also, there is much to be said about quality of the drugs; as usual, lack of monitoring and failure to ensure the production standards in pharmaceutical industries have led to lower quality drugs entering the market. It is essential also to take measures to stop antibiotics from entering the food chain, which is happening due to non-therapeutic use of antibiotics for fattening up animals. It is time to consider banning over-the-counter sale of antibiotics. More than any other country, we believe, we have more people who are disposed to self-medication. There is also the practice of not finishing antibiotic courses that has contributed to resistance to antibiotics.

This matter demands immediate attention. Otherwise, the fear of the chairman of Pharmacology at BSMMU—that we might not have any drugs left to treat bacterial infections in future because all the known bacteria have acquired resistance against extant antibiotics—may come true.

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

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Save our elephants

Eleven elephants were killed this year—seven were electrocuted while four, including a three-year-old calf, were shot dead. Most of the killings occurred in Jamalpur and Sherpur districts until 2017, but this year, it all took place in the forests of Cox’s Bazar and Chittagong Hill Tracts. We are to blame for the destruction of the elephant’s natural habitat, creating food scarcity. We must save their habitats and free up their roaming grounds, and the murder of such magnificent creatures must not go unpunished.

Sanjida Haque, Dhaka

MEENAKSHI GANGULY

IN 2015, Salma’s husband and his parents held her down and poured nitric acid down her throat because they wanted more than the Tk 100,000 (USD 1,100) that her parents had already paid in dowry. For months since the wedding, her father-in-law had beat her repeatedly, demanding more. Salma went to stay with her parents to escape the abuse. But when villagers started gossiping about her broken marriage, her parents told her to return to her in-laws. When she said she was being physically abused, they told her “you just need to endure.” Now, she is fed through a tube in her stomach.

Salma’s story is disturbingly common in Bangladesh, where over 70 percent of married women and girls have faced some form of intimate partner abuse, about half of whom say their partners physically assaulted them. But the majority of women never told anyone about this abuse and only three percent take legal action.

In many cases like Salma’s, survivors seeking help are turned away—by family, community, and the police—and can be in even more danger when forced to return to their abuser. When Salma tried to escape the violence, she was met with stigma and—with only a handful of government-run shelters in the country

The Bangladesh government should ensure that legal aid is reaching women and girls in need and that they are aware of their rights. Last year, the national legal aid services organisation distributed funds to 2.5 times more men than women.

ALEXANDRA BERG VON LINDE and SUDIPTO MUKERJEE

BANGLADESH has come a long way in its fight for women’s advancement. The government has prioritised promoting gender equality and women’s empowerment as a key development agenda and has undertaken several policy and programmatic measures consistent with its goals. Consequently, Bangladesh has made commendable progress over the past decade and leads South Asia on closing the gender gap in areas such as women’s economic participation, educational attainment, health and political empowerment.

Women’s empowerment has also been a prime focus of the tripartite partnership between the Government of Bangladesh, UNDP and Sweden. Over the years, we are proud to have supported the government in a range of efforts that helped Bangladesh move forward, from expanding gender-sensitive social protection to countering violence against women and girls.

But challenges remain. Traditional gender roles still prevail. Only about 36 percent of Bangladesh’s women participate in the labour market. An estimated nine out of 10 working women are in the informal economy and have less savings and access to social protection than men. Many are burdened with unpaid care and domestic work.

The Covid-19 pandemic is exacerbating these challenges. The hard-fought gains for women’s empowerment are under threat. Females have been disproportionately impacted when countries announced national lockdowns to contain the pandemic. A UN survey highlights that, in Bangladesh, about 25 percent of female respondents reported losing informal jobs, while another 24 percent saw decreased working hours. Overall, they also received less support compared to men.

In addition to the loss of livelihoods, Covid-19 is affecting human development for women and girls. For example, they are likely to experience more food insecurity than males in the same household. While domestic work increased for both women and men during lockdowns, the burden of unpaid childcare work falls substantially on mothers and female caretakers. At the same time, the lockdown cut off access to critical health services for women, including a major drop in institutionally assisted deliveries. In Bangladesh, ongoing school closures also affect nearly three million ultra-poor, including primary school children enrolled in government school-feeding programmes. The fall in household incomes along with missed meals can also accelerate risks of school dropouts for girls that, in turn, can lead

16 DAYS OF ACTIVISM AGAINST GENDER-BASED VIOLENCE

Why is it so difficult for Bangladeshi women to get justice?

and limited access to support services—she had nowhere else to go.

Salma has fought for a legal remedy for over five years now, but to little avail. Her father, meanwhile, had a stroke and the family cannot afford to continue pursuing justice. The public prosecutor bringing the case told her that her in-laws were paying more bribes so she

women and girls seeking legal recourse never have to give up.

The 16 Days of Activism is an annual international campaign in which governments and activists come together to address violence against women and girls. It runs from November 25, the International Day for the Elimination of Violence against Women, until December



For years, Bangladeshi rights organisations have been calling for victims of violence to get speedy access to justice.

PHOTO: ANISUR RAHMAN

“should pay more money.” “That is how you will get justice,” he told her. He too, of course, requested bribes, she said.

Every time they go to court to find out the status of the case, court officials, police and the prosecutor all ask for “tea and snacks costs,” Salma said. Now she says she is telling her father, “You have been going to the courts for the last five years and nothing is happening. Let’s just give up.”

But there are concrete actions the Bangladesh government and donor governments can take now—during the 16 days of activism against gender-based violence—so that Salma and other

10, Human Rights Day.

The Bangladesh government should work with concerned donor governments, activists and the UN to conduct an audit of currently available shelters, disseminate this information, and commit to opening at least one shelter in each of Bangladesh’s 67 districts by 2025. Shelters should remove restrictions that limit their accessibility, such as requiring court orders to stay there or restricting the presence of children. No woman or girl should ever have to “just endure” violence because there is nowhere else to go.

The law ministry should immediately

Championing women’s empowerment in a time of crisis

to child marriage, with further increased health, educational, economic and gender-based violence risks.

Furthermore, the sharp increase in gender-based violence during the pandemic is a great source of concern. This is a global phenomenon, which the UN Secretary General describes as a pandemic within a pandemic. In Bangladesh, surveys documented nearly an increase of 70 percent in reported incidents of violence against women and girls in March and April 2020 compared to the same time last year. Many were unable to escape the violence during the lockdown while access to legal recourse and urgent protection measures were cut short. More worryingly, perpetrators of gender-based violence often get away without serious punitive action. This is despite Bangladesh’s main laws on violence against women stipulating that

transfers, skills training and access to networks since 2015. During the pandemic, about 200 destitute women trained in tailoring turned to making WHO-compliant masks and supplied these to local markets and neighbouring districts. They have so far sold more than 67,000 masks, using their skills to provide for themselves and their families while serving a bigger purpose of protecting communities.

Programmes like SWAPNO highlight that the role of social protection should not only be limited to providing relief. They can provide a path to more sustainable and equitable economic and social development. Even before Covid-19, the programme was successfully supporting women to move out of poverty while also contributing to their empowerment. Given the pandemic, the role of social protection has become



PHOTO: UNDP

cases should be resolved in a timely manner. Yet, access to the justice system remains inadequate. Combined with obstacles such as weak implementation of law, pursuing legal remedies becomes extremely difficult for women and girls that are already in a vulnerable position.

Despite these worrying trends, there are encouraging examples. Take the women in the ongoing SWAPNO (Strengthening Women’s Ability for Productive New Opportunities) programme, for instance. These resilient women have simultaneously been responding to Covid-19, the aftermath of Cyclone Amphan as well as monsoon floods. A joint initiative of the Government of Bangladesh, UNDP, Sweden, BSRM, Marico and Bank Asia, SWAPNO has been empowering women to move out of poverty by combining social security

even more relevant in contributing to recovery plans and addressing underlying issues of poverty, inequality and, in particular, gender inequality.

The ongoing response to Covid-19 is also an opportunity to progress towards a more comprehensive and resilient social protection system, in line with Bangladesh’s National Social Security Strategy, in order to ensure better preparedness for the next crisis. As such, a strengthened social protection system that ensures greater stakeholder accountability could contribute to a more robust and greener recovery and help achieve the Sustainable Development Goals by 2030.

As advocates of human rights and equality, we hold that full and equal enjoyment of rights is essential for a life of dignity and security. Likewise, the

create an independent commission to appoint public prosecutors to ensure their independence. Donor governments like the US that are involved in justice reform should ensure that training for public prosecutors and police emphasises working with victims of gender-based violence and consider joint training for prosecutors and investigating officers to improve coordination on cases of gender-based violence.

As Salma described, as cases go on for years, justice officials frequently demand bribes, making it more and more difficult to continue to pursue justice. This problem is exacerbated by a lack of transparency and accessibility of case information, given Bangladesh’s 3.7 million-case backlog. Without a centralised filing system, cases get lost and survivors are forced to pay bribes to get court officials to find their case information and move cases forward. The German government led an impressive justice audit in Bangladesh and would be well-placed to spearhead a project to move case files into a centralised online filing system—gender-based violence cases would be a good place to start.

The Bangladesh government should ensure that legal aid is reaching women and girls in need and that they are aware of their rights. Last year, the national legal aid services organisation distributed funds to 2.5 times more men than women.

The law commission drafted a witness protection law nearly a decade ago—it should be passed into law in consultation with Bangladeshi women’s rights organisations, and donor governments should support the implementation of a witness protection programme.

Violence against women and girls is so pervasive in Bangladesh, it is sometimes dismissed as unsolvable. For these 16 days of activism, the government and donors should listen to activists who are offering workable solutions.

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rule of law and accountable institutions are cornerstones of a well-functioning democracy.

This year marks the anniversaries of two landmark legislations addressing gender-based violence in Bangladesh: the Nari-o-Shishu Nirjatan Daman Ain (Women and Children Repression Prevention Act) from 2000 and the Domestic Violence (Prevention and Protection) Act from 2010. This year also marks the entering of the final phase of its national action plan to build “a society without violence against women and children by 2025.”

Given this context, we work closely with the National Human Rights Commission (NHRC) in generating dialogue on the strengthening of democracy and gender equality as well as full and equal respect for human rights. We support the Commission’s efforts to connect with other human rights organisations and citizens alike. Our joint efforts also aim to enhance the capacity of public institutions to combat violence against women, and we advocate more broadly to bring women and young people to the forefront of all developments by removing the obstacles that hinder their progress.

The world is facing challenges on a scale that was hard to imagine only a year ago. In this time of crisis, empowering women and girls and addressing the root causes of inequality become even more important. This is something we must do together. Sweden and UNDP will remain steadfast partners in Bangladesh’s journey for sustainable and inclusive development.

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Alexandra Berg von Linde is Ambassador of Sweden and Sudipto Mukerjee is Resident Representative at UNDP.