

Poverty during the pandemic: Three stories

AN OPEN DIALOGUE



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IN this time of the pandemic and the resultant economic slowdown, one has to be mindful of the effects of these twin curses on the poor of Bangladesh. The stimulus packages and direct economic relief can help somewhat, but these will bypass a sizeable chunk of the needy. I have been in touch with three families who live in three areas of Bangladesh—Dhaka, Sylhet and Jamalpur—to track the economic and health impacts of the disruptions during the last eight months. What my interactions with them reveal is that pre-existing health conditions and their lack of savings have adversely affected them and their ability to earn a living. One of them has become a dependent and the other two have come back to Dhaka, putting their future plans on hold until the pandemic recedes and true economic recovery takes place.

I, along with many others who have worked on poverty elimination, have voiced the need to support poor families during times of crises such as natural disasters, economic slowdowns and sickness of the principal bread-earner. With no safety net and zero net worth, a single crop failure or morbidity of the head of the household can push a family, which is inching its way up the income ladder, back to square one.

During the pandemic, the impacts on low-income earners in Bangladesh have been of concern from the beginning of the lockdown in March. The G-20 summit leaders this week acknowledged that the

pandemic has had a far-reaching economic impact on developing countries, pushing millions into extreme poverty. Many have lost their jobs, and the pandemic has also adversely affected goals to eliminate hunger and improve health conditions.

It's not all hopeless though. There are voices of optimism who are working on new ways to break the cycle of poverty. Martin Ravallion,

dreamer. We can accept his proposal to “use ideas, data and analysis to help fight global poverty”, but many like me consider that to “think that poverty might one day be gone” could be a little too audacious and out of touch with the harsh realities of the lives of our poor, today.

Coming back to the families who live near the poverty line, consider Anima, who has been working in Dhaka, taking care of

out a subsistence living. They have no adequate resources for healthcare and every episode of illness has taken a toll on Anima and her daughters. She herself has a bad liver condition as well as high blood pressure. Her medicines cost Tk 2,100 per month, which she pays out of her salary, but one of her daughters has a serious illness for which she was divorced by her husband, who was unable to support her or defray the cost of her

middle-class suburb, and sent her children to study at madrasahs, paying for their education from her meagre income. Her daughters, as they were reaching puberty, were enrolled in a residential programme with a madrasah and received good educations. One of them, Urmi, is married and the other, Arifa, is a teacher at a madrasah.

However, Ashura herself is paying for her years of hard work and neglect

she has been associated with since her young age. Recently, once the lockdown began, she had to take early retirement after a brief period of hospitalisation with unpaid bills, and temporarily moved to Netrokona to be near her sister. Her daughters are very close to her, but they are unlikely to be able to support her medical treatment. Any serious episode of diabetic outburst or kidney failure might be catastrophic for her (after finishing this article, I was informed that Ashura sadly passed away on November 22 due to kidney failure).

The youngest of this group, Azim, has been in and out of different jobs since he moved to Dhaka from his birthplace in a small village in Golapganj thana, 20 miles from Sylhet municipality. He was born in a lower-middle-income family but the death of his father at an early age pushed all siblings, seven brothers and three sisters, into severe economic uncertainties, and they had to start finding for themselves. He received very little formal education but managed to learn how to read and perform simple arithmetic on his own. Azim, a young and energetic man who is now in his thirties, has tried his hand in the RMG sector, small-scale business, domestic work as well as rural entrepreneurship. He is able to pick up any trade, but poor luck and the fickleness of small business fortune has prevented him from getting out of the cycle of poverty and destitution. He is saving to launch his next business enterprise as a vendor in the bustling bazaar of Sylhet town, but he has to weigh his prospects of success given his limited capital. He says, “If nothing else works, I will become a caretaker for this family.”

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PHOTO: SK ENAMUL HAQ

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of her health conditions, and suffers from serious diabetic conditions as well as a failing kidney. Although she managed to save a sizeable chunk from her salary while working abroad with a Bangladeshi diplomat in Bhutan and European countries, she has fallen victim to the greed of her relatives, who borrowed from her but failed to return the loan during her times of need. She was working in Dhaka with one of the families

medical expenses.

Ashura, another middle-aged woman in my study group, is a model mother who got married early, after she moved to Dhaka from Mymensingh to make a living. Her husband died, leaving her with three young children, a boy and two girls, to raise on her own resources. They lived in one of the slums of Dhaka and she worked as a domestic help in Lalmatia, a

an elderly person in an affluent neighbourhood. She has gone through many ups and downs since her birth in Barisal almost six decades ago. Her four daughters and one son have managed to hold their heads above water thanks to the RMG industry and the booming economy over the last 35 years. However, two of her daughters have been in and out of marriage and have depended on each other to eke

an economist who had previously advised the World Bank, tweeted “End Poverty” to mark the 28th anniversary of the International Day for the Eradication of Poverty, celebrated on October 17 each year. The UN Geneva office was poetic when it tweeted on November 7, “All humans are born free and equal in dignity and rights”. I must concede that Martin Ravallion is a very imaginative person or shall we say, a

PROJECT SYNDICATE

Investing in a feminist peace



PHUMZILE MLAMBO-NGCUKA

We should be spending our money not on tools of destruction, but on a kind of “feminist peace” that upholds basic economic and social rights for all. This means guaranteeing broad social protections and delivering vital services, such as health care, childcare, and education.

DURING the Covid-19 pandemic, public life in much of the world has largely ground to a halt. For the two billion people living in conflict-affected countries, however, there has been no lull in violence and upheaval. Some of the world's conflicts have even escalated or been reignited during the crisis, dealing devastating new blows to infrastructure and healthcare systems that were only beginning to be rebuilt. Globally, we continue to invest far more in the tools of war than in the foundations of peace.

Of course, some are working for peace. On March 23, at the outset of the pandemic, United Nations Secretary-General Antonio Guterres called for a global ceasefire, in order to enable countries to focus on the Covid-19 crisis and allow humanitarian organisations to reach vulnerable populations. More than 100 women's organisations from Iraq, Libya, Palestine, Syria and Yemen quickly joined the appeal with a joint statement advocating a broad Covid-19 truce, which could form the basis for a lasting peace.

It should come as no surprise that women were among the first to support the call for a ceasefire. This month, governments and civil society came together to mark 20 years since UN Security Council Resolution 1325 first

recognised women's pivotal roles on the frontlines of peace-building efforts.

It is women—including young women—who do much of the painstaking, long-term work that underpin high-profile formal agreements, which are still often reached in talks that exclude them. For example, in Syria, women have negotiated ceasefires to allow the passage of humanitarian aid, worked in field hospitals and schools, distributed food and medicine, and documented human rights violations. In South Sudan, women have mediated and resolved tribal disputes to prevent conflicts from escalating to violence.

Women also spearhead the critical work of campaigning for peace, including through education programmes, which teach young people that conflict is never inevitable. Feminist organisations have long called for nuclear disarmament, arms control, and the reallocation of funds from the military to social investments.

These appeals are essential. But they have gone unanswered. So has the UN's call for a Covid-19 ceasefire: according to the Norwegian Refugee Council, in the two months following Guterres's appeal, armed conflict in 19 countries displaced at least 661,000 people. Unless we listen to women, and shift our investments from war toward peace, the devastation will continue.

Last year, global military expenditure reached USD 1.9 trillion, following the largest annual increase in a decade. In the last quarter-century—since the landmark Beijing Declaration



PHOTO: REUTERS/MARIANA BAZO

and Platform for Action called on governments to “recognise and address the dangers to society of armed conflict and the negative effect of excessive military expenditures”—defence spending has doubled.

More weapons and soldiers mean fewer resources for the 55 percent of the global population—including nearly two-thirds of the world's children—who lack any social protection, leaving them exposed to the pandemic's brutal social and economic consequences. Military might will not help the 83-132 million people added by Covid-19 to the global tally of the undernourished in 2020.

Liberian Peacemaker and Nobel Peace Prize laureate Leymah Gbowee has it right: “Peace is not the absence of war,” she has said, but rather “the full expression of human dignity.” It “is an environment in which human needs

lockdowns, and need more funding to meet it. In addition, governments should be ensuring adequate supplies of medical and personal protective equipment, which have often run out during the pandemic, even in the world's richest countries.

A feminist peace also means that everyone's voice is heard, with all groups included fully and meaningfully in the decisions that affect their lives. Here, women's organisations have a vital role to play, helping women and other marginalised groups gain access to decision-making arenas and giving them the resources and confidence to participate.


But, again, more funding is needed. Bilateral aid to women's organisations in fragile or conflict-affected countries averaged USD 96 million per year in 2017-18—a mere 0.005 percent of global military expenditure.

For all the devastation it has caused, the Covid-19 crisis also represents a generational opportunity to build more inclusive economies and societies, free of the scourge of violent conflict. A concerted effort to demilitarise our world and build a feminist peace—beginning with a global ceasefire, and followed by a comprehensive reappraisal of how we allocate our resources—must be central to this vision.

Phumzile Mlambo-Ngcuka is Executive Director of UN Women.

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QUOTABLE Quote



ANTHONY EDEN (1897-1977) British politician.

Nothing is more destructive of human dignity than a rule which imposes a mute and blind obedience.

CROSSWORD BY THOMAS JOSEPH

ACROSS

1 Airport line

5 He hit 61 in '61

10 Test type

11 Sand substance

12 Odometer unit

13 Tooth layer

14 Nightmare

16 Many corny puns

20 Blood line

23 Afternoon break

24 Demi or Julianne

25 Selected

27 Free TV spot: Abbr.

28 Protectively covered

29 Weeper

32 Big-time kudos

36 Tex-Mex treat

39 Concept

40 Banished people

41 Some deer

42 Bargains

43 Goes astray

DOWN

1 Rooster topper

2 Opera piece

3 Lacking locks

4 Luge competitor

5 Singer Nicki

6 Texas landmark

7 Brink

8 Rink makeup

9 Mule of old song

11 Squalid

15 Steak choice

17 Macramé unit

18 Move slowly

19 Went 90

20 Band boosters

21 Painter Bonheur

22 Swamp croaker

25 NYSE entry

26 Harvest festival event

28 Does some programming

30 Petite

31 Yarns

33 Freshener target

34 Jury member

35 Pert talk

36 Slugger Williams

37 Log chopper

38 Farrow of film

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