

## Priceless service of young Red Crescent volunteers

*We thank them for their dedication*

EVER since the beginning of the Covid-19 pandemic (and the consequent standstill which it caused our world to come to), every small step towards progress has been accompanied by the reality we face as a nation, of a dearth of necessary resources. Not only do we lack the proper facilities needed to accommodate patients affected by the virus and those who are sick with other diseases, there are also not enough human hands around to tend to each patient. On top of all that, there has also been the upsurge of unemployment to worry ourselves with. But while there have been lay-offs abound across all sectors, after a year of the beginning of the pandemic, there seems to be some semblance of return to our normal lives.

With the arrival of the first batches of Covid-19 vaccines and the beginning of the inoculation campaign nationwide on February 7 of this year, the vaccination centres of the country have operated in an organised, efficient way. While many were sceptical about the effectiveness of the vaccine at first, and were also apprehensive about its side effects, things have taken a turn for the better with more people registering for the vaccine each day.

One would expect the lack of human resources to be a notable concern during this campaign but very fortunately for us, the young volunteers of the Bangladesh Red Crescent Society (BDRCS)—with the help of the Directorate General of Health Service (DGHS)—have so far played a huge role in ensuring that the inoculation of each recipient is completed efficiently.

These 4,200 volunteers (aged between 18 and 30 years) are working in over 1,000 vaccination centres across the country, in exchange for one meal a day, transport costs, and the satisfaction of giving back to their community. The silver lining of university classes being held online has been to avail these young people with the time to volunteer for such an urgent national cause. Once the vaccination campaign is more spread out, a total of over 14,000 such volunteers from the organisation will also be able to help out.

For the past couple of weeks, the talk of the town has been how smoothly the inoculation process is being conducted, from registration to aftercare. Clearly, the dedication of these young individuals cannot ever be measured in monetary terms, but we can all work towards building a society that is well-deserving of such voluntary services.

## Let all languages live

*Take steps to preserve the near-extinct indigenous languages*

AS we observed the International Mother Language Day, remembered our language martyrs with respect, expressed our love for our mother tongue and urged the government to ensure the use of Bangla in all spheres of life, including in higher education, we seemed to have forgotten about many of the indigenous communities of the country, whose mother language are facing the threat of being lost forever. As The Daily Star reported on Sunday, 14 indigenous languages—Kondo, Kharia, Koda, Soura, Mundari, Kole, Malto, Khumi, Pangkhua, Rengmitcha, Chak, Khyang, Lusai, and Laleng (Patro)—are on the verge of extinction because the number of their users have diminished. According to experts, a language is considered to be endangered when it is spoken by less than 5,000 people. Sadly, the situation of the languages we are talking about is so dire that they are now spoken by only 10 to 12 elderly people of their communities.

As Unesco describes, “a language disappears when its speakers disappear or when they shift to speaking another language—most often, a larger language used by a more powerful group.” While this could be a major reason why these 14 languages are in such danger, there must be other economic, religious and social factors that contributed to this situation. By now we know how the dominance of the Bangla language over other indigenous languages in the hills and plainlands has led many indigenous communities to speak Bangla instead of their own language. Another major threat that these languages face is that they are not used to educate the children from these communities. Although every child has the right to study in their mother tongue up to the primary level in our country, not much effort has been made to ensure that. Moreover, the languages which do not have their own alphabets face even greater threat of going extinct compared to those that have alphabets. Observing the International Mother Language Day will be all the more meaningful when all the indigenous people of the country are able to speak their mother tongue and get educated in their own language. A lot of effort is needed from the government and other stakeholders to ensure this. And steps also need to be taken to preserve the languages that are now spoken by only a few elderly people of the communities. Only documenting these languages is not enough to save them. We think forming a language commission to save the endangered languages, as suggested by experts, would be a wise decision.

## LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

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### Violence over a cricket match

What happened in Jahangirnagar University (JU) on February 19 is appalling. Students of JU were allegedly attacked by locals over a cricket match.

While the police were eventually able to get the situation under control, there have been no cases filed and it seems nothing is going to be done about it. Will this indiscriminate violence against students have no consequences? Or was there a motive bigger than just a dispute over a cricket match?

Obaidul Haque, By e-mail

# How the pandemic has affected women's work in BIMSTEC region

### MACRO MIRROR



FAHMIDA KHATUN

THE ongoing pandemic has adversely affected women around the world in a number of ways, including through employment and income loss. The countries within the Bay of Bengal

Initiative for Multi-Sectoral Technical and Economic Cooperation (BIMSTEC) have also suffered from its effects. These countries had made some improvements in terms of women's empowerment over the past years. Women's participation in the labour market, educational qualification, and participation in decision-making jobs have increased in these countries. However, the gender gap is still wide. The recently published Human Development Report 2020 of the United Nations Development Programme shows that in terms of the Gender Inequality Index, Bangladesh ranked 133rd, Bhutan 99th, India 123rd, Myanmar 118th, Nepal 110th, Sri Lanka 90th, and Thailand ranked 80th among the 189 countries in 2019.

The World Economic Forum revealed that in 2020, out of 153 countries, five BIMSTEC countries such as Bhutan, India, Myanmar, Nepal, and Sri Lanka ranked outside the top 100 in the Global Gender Gap Index (GGGI). Bangladesh ranked 50th and Thailand 75th on the list. All these countries have slipped in the GGGI 2020 compared to the 2018 index due to the coronavirus pandemic. Compared to 2018, Bangladesh, Thailand, and Sri Lanka lost two positions each, India and Nepal four positions, Bhutan nine positions, and Myanmar slipped down by 26 positions. The GGGI is prepared based on four indicators such as economic participation

opportunity, educational attainment, health and survival, and political empowerment. One of the reasons for this drop is the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on women.

The impact of the pandemic has been disproportionately felt by certain sections of people. Women are among the most vulnerable sections who have been the worst victims of the pandemic. The impact of the pandemic may have long-run

did the manufacturers face losses, but the women workers also had to bear the brunt of it. Many of them have been dismissed or given leave without pay from their jobs.

In the service sector, the tourism industry has suffered due to the pandemic. In Thailand, Sri Lanka, and Nepal, the share of employment in the tourism sector is 9, 8.1, and 6.8 percent, respectively. Women's participation in the tourism sector in these countries is higher

support, out of which 75 percent were male-headed and 25 percent were female-headed households.

Despite the increased adverse effects of the pandemic on women, support measures by governments for them have been insignificant. There is a need for increased support to reinstate women's businesses and to create income opportunities for them. The stimulus packages in the form of liquidity support



Garment workers who have not been paid for months gather to demonstrate in front of their factory at Malibagh in the capital in April 2020.

PHOTO: SK ENAMUL HAQ

*Women who are self-employed in micro, small, and medium enterprises are facing serious challenges to stay afloat during the pandemic. Demand and supply disruptions have led to income erosions and even business closures in some cases.*

implications on women's empowerment across countries.

Women in the region have been hit hard by the pandemic as they are mostly engaged in low-paying informal activities. As a result, as soon as the pandemic broke out, they were the first ones to lose their jobs. Those who are still employed have to accept reduced working hours and lower income. The pandemic has also increased the burden of household activities. They have experienced higher reduction in employment and working hours compared to men in most economies in the second quarter of 2020, compared to the same period in the previous year.

One of the most important sources of female employment in a number of BIMSTEC countries is the readymade garments (RMG) industry. Readymade garment manufacturing is the largest employer of women among all industrial sectors in some countries in the region. Roughly one in seven women are employed in the sector in Sri Lanka and one in nine women in Bangladesh and Myanmar. Therefore, as global buyers cancelled orders due to economic recessions in their countries, not only

than that of men. The pandemic has forced them to either go on unpaid leaves or accept lower wages; many have even lost their jobs.

Women who are self-employed in micro, small, and medium enterprises are facing serious challenges to stay afloat during the pandemic. Demand and supply disruptions have led to income erosions and even business closures in some cases.

Consequently, governments had to adopt certain policy measures in response to this. In India, 200 million women with Jan Dhan accounts were to be given an amount of Rs 500 per month for three months. Additionally, the Indian government has also announced that it will provide free LPG cylinders to women in 83 million families below the poverty line for three months under the Ujjwala scheme. In Bangladesh, an amount of Tk 20,000 crore has been allocated for the cottage, micro, small, and medium enterprises. Besides, the government has also announced that it will provide Tk 2,500 as cash support to 50 lakh (5 million) households. As of October 2020, a total of about 35 lakh (3.5 million) households (70 percent) received this

have been difficult for women to access due to various structural problems. These include lack of collaterals, bank guarantee and necessary documents, and banks' reluctance to provide loans to small businesses.

The nature of business is also rapidly changing. The pandemic has expedited the use of technology in work and in business. E-commerce has been flourishing. However, women are not being able to use this opportunity not only because of a lack of funds but also of skills. So, providing women all the necessary support to benefit from this opportunity will require upskilling and reskilling them. Clearly, women in the region will require support from the governments, the private sector, and the non-government organisations to be able to catch up with the emerging nature of business and the new dynamics of the labour market.

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## Sustainable energy key to Covid-19 recovery in Asia and the Pacific



ARMIDA SALSIAH ALISJAHBANA

THE past year is one that few of us will forget. While the impacts of the Covid-19 pandemic have played out unevenly across Asia and the Pacific, the region has been

spared many of the worst effects seen in other parts of the world. The pandemic has reminded us that a reliable and uninterrupted energy supply is critical to managing this crisis.

Beyond ensuring that hospitals and healthcare facilities continue to function, energy supports the systems and coping mechanisms we rely on to work remotely, undertake distance learning and communicate essential health information. Importantly, energy will also underpin cold chains and logistics to ensure that billions of vaccines make their way to the people who need them most.

The good news is our region's energy systems have continued to function throughout the pandemic. A new report, “Shaping a sustainable energy future in Asia and the Pacific: A greener, more resilient and inclusive energy system”, released today by the United Nations Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific (ESCAP) shows the energy demand reductions have mainly impacted fossil fuels and depressed oil and gas prices. Renewable energy development in countries across the region, such as China and India, has continued at a healthy pace throughout 2020.

As the Asia-Pacific region transitions its energy system to clean, efficient and low carbon technologies, the emergence of the pandemic raises some fundamental questions. How can a transformed energy system help ensure our resilience to future

crises such as Covid-19? As we recover from this pandemic, can we launch a “green recovery” that simultaneously rebuilds our economies and puts us on track to meet global climate and sustainability goals?

Clean and sustainable energy is central to a recovery from Covid-19 pandemic. By emphasising the importance of the SDGs as a guiding framework for recovering better together, we must focus on two critical aspects:

build back better. If countries focus their stimulus efforts on the industries of the past such as fossil fuels, we risk not creating the jobs we need, or not moving in the right direction to achieve the global goals that are critical to future generations. The energy sector offers multiple opportunities to align stimulus with the clean industries of the future.

The evidence shows that renewable energy and energy efficiency projects create more jobs for the same investment



Investing in low-carbon infrastructure and technologies can create a basis for the more ambitious climate pledges we need to reach the Paris Agreement targets of a 2-degree global warming limit.

PHOTO: STAR

First, by making meaningful progress on the SDGs, we can address many of the systemic issues that made societies more vulnerable to Covid-19 in the first place—health, decent work, poverty and inequalities, to name a few.

Second, by directing stimulus spending to investments that support the achievement of the SDGs, we can

as fossil fuel projects. By increasing expenditure on clean cooking and electricity access, we can enhance economic activity in rural areas and bring modern infrastructure that can make these communities more resilient and inclusive, particularly for the wellbeing of women and children.

Additionally, investing in low-carbon

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infrastructure and technologies can create a basis for the more ambitious climate pledges we need to reach the Paris Agreement targets of a 2-degree global warming limit. On this note, several countries have announced carbon neutrality, demonstrating a long-term vision and commitment to an accelerated transformation to sustainable energy. Phasing out the use of coal from power generation portfolios by substituting with renewables, ending fossil fuel subsidies, and implementing carbon pricing are some of the steps we can take.

The Covid-19 crisis has forced us to change many aspects of our lives to keep ourselves and our societies safe. It has shown that we are more adaptive and resilient than we may have believed. Nevertheless, we should not waste the opportunities this crisis presents for transformative change. It should not deflect us from the urgent task of making modern energy available to all and decarbonising the region's energy system through a transition to sustainable energy. Instead, it should provide us with a renewed sense of urgency.

We must harness the capacity of sustainable energy to rebuild our societies and economies while protecting the environment in the pursuit of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development.

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