

Vigilance against religious extremists

We must never let our guard down

ONE hears very often from a few inveterate optimists that Bangladesh has seen the end of religious extremism. We have been continually cautioning against entertaining any euphoria that absence of demonstrative activity on their part is not an indication of the demise of the religious extremists altogether. Yesterday's extensive report in this paper, detailing how one of the prominent proscribed extremist groups has been regrouping over the last several years, bears out our warning.

Admittedly, there has been no palpable activity by the religious extremist groups since the brutal Holey Artisan killings in July 2016, but as we had predicted earlier, most of these groups had gone into a mode of suspended animation after that incident to avoid the intensive offensive launched by our security forces to pre-empt their future actions. That they have not been able to launch any major attack since 2016 speaks of the success of our security agencies, particularly the Anti-Terrorism Task Force.

The said report confirms what experts have warned us about from time to time. These groups will bide time and wait for an opportune moment to strike. In the meanwhile, they will do as the Ansarullah Bangladesh Team (ABT) is doing—recruiting through online platforms, making use of communication technology to recruit new members and for propagating their message, targeting the unsuspecting segment of the society and those vulnerable because of their monetary or societal standing. We believe that the said reports also provide several pointers that the administration should take cognisance of. What should be constantly kept in mind is that these groups sustain because of certain enabling factors. Notwithstanding the persuasiveness of their ideological propaganda, the administration needs to identify their target audience as well their sympathisers. The next matter that should be addressed are the issues that they exploit to garner support, and address those. These could be economic, social as well as political. And it is the political issues that these groups would exploit primarily, gaining of political power being their ultimate objective without which their religious objective would remain unfulfilled. A political void or a turmoil is what they wait for to pounce. And all efforts must be made to turn the tap off their monetary support. We must never let our guard down when it comes to religious extremists.

Rehabilitate female returnee migrants

Govt must ensure their rights and uphold their dignity

DURING the Covid-19 pandemic, the unfair treatment of Bangladeshi migrant workers in host countries was frequently in the spotlight—whether it was the detention of unregistered workers in unsafe facilities, their lack of access to proper healthcare and nutrition after forced redundancies, or their mass deportation back to Bangladesh, all the while facing wage theft and great uncertainty over future prospects of employment.

According to data from the Brac Migration Programme, female migrant workers have also been greatly affected by this uncertainty, as almost 50,000 female migrant workers were forced to return home from 21 countries during the pandemic. What is even more concerning is that despite the fact that global air communications largely remained suspended during the pandemic, 77 corpses of female migrant workers were returned to their families in Bangladesh.

Time and again, we have reported on the horrific abuse that Bangladeshi female migrant workers have faced in host countries, many of whom are also victims of trafficking. It is rare for these workers to receive justice in host countries for the crimes committed against them, although the recent sentencing of a Saudi national by a criminal court in Saudi Arabia for the torture and murder of Bangladeshi migrant worker Abiron Begum is a step in the right direction. However, we are yet to see a coordinated and sincere effort from our own authorities in dealing with traffickers, as well as the syndicate of recruiting agencies and public officials who work together to place the lives of our female workers at risk and profit from it.

The government needs to urgently bring recruiting agencies under a monitoring mechanism and ensure their accountability, while also putting pressure on host countries to ensure safer working conditions for our women. At the same time, NGOs and the government need to work together for the rehabilitation of the female migrant workers who have returned during the pandemic. Although the government has put forward a Tk 200 crore special loan package for the rehabilitation of returnee migrants, reports suggest that only about five percent of these loans have been disbursed so far. Have female returnees been able to access these loans at all? The authorities involved must look into this.

This International Women's Day, we remind the government that our female migrant workers have also greatly contributed to this country's journey to "developing country" status through their hard-earned remittances. We must ensure that they are treated with the dignity and respect they deserve.

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

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Strictly enforce polythene ban

It is most unfortunate that polythene bags are being used for grocery shopping even to this day. Polythene bags were banned in 2002, but they are still being used despite the availability of other alternatives—such as jute bags.

It is time for the authorities to actually enforce the ban. Otherwise, what is the point of passing such laws in the first place?

Md Zillur Rahaman
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INTERNATIONAL WOMEN'S DAY

Achieving an equal future for women in a Covid-19 world



FAHMIDA KHATUN

THIS year's International women's day (IWD) is being celebrated at a time when the Covid-19 pandemic has devastated many achievements the world had so far made. From a health crisis, the pandemic has turned into an economic and social problem. Hence, it has not only reduced economic progress and squeezed individual income, it has disrupted every aspect of human lives in all possible ways. The impact of the pandemic on women has been disproportionate. Women have experienced increased violence, have lost jobs and income, and took more burden of work at home. Girls dropped out of schools and got married at an early age risking their health. So, on the whole, the pandemic has taken away much of the achievements that were made in case of women's empowerment. Many successes have been reversed.

Now, more than a year after the beginning of the outbreak and with vaccination rolling out, an economic recovery is expected to be on the horizon. However, this recovery will not happen at the same pace for everyone. Economists have suggested that the recovery from the pandemic will be "K" shaped. This means that while the larger and stronger businesses will be able to rebound fast, the smaller and weaker ones will lag behind. Women fall in the second category. Women are mostly engaged in micro, small and medium enterprises. Their businesses are often informal in

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nature. With limited access to finance, they are not being able to recover from the economic shock of the pandemic. So, they will still be struggling while others move ahead.

In this context, how is the theme of IWD 2021, "Women in leadership: achieving an equal future in a covid-19 world," relevant? The theme is a reflection of the present situation. It could also be a reality of the future. As opposed to women's increased vulnerability, it

with better jobs and higher income. It has been widely discussed that several smart organisations will continue to rely on technology during the post-pandemic period. They are investing on IT infrastructure. Technology based work has been found to be more efficient, smart and productive. Physical presence at offices involves higher operational costs. So, even in a pandemic free world, technology will determine the modality of work which may not necessarily

Bangladeshi women entrepreneurs could make use of this opportunity. Lack of skills is a major impediment. As a result, inequality in terms of access to jobs and higher income exists.

In order to attain an equal future during and after the pandemic, women in Bangladesh must be well equipped through better education and training. Technological upgradation in many sectors has taken away more jobs from women than from men. The largest



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SOURCE:
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has also been observed that across the world, women have worked relentlessly as front-line workers in hospitals during the pandemic. At home, women have been in charge of the healthcare of family members. Women leaders in charge of leading countries have been prompt and more efficient in tackling the challenges of the pandemic. Now, in the recovery phase, women are playing crucial roles by extending their services in several ways. These include providing vaccination and other healthcare services, extending social services and working at home and offices.

The pandemic has also expedited the digitisation which has benefited many women along with men. The fact that remote work is possible using technology has created opportunities for women. Those who would have left their jobs because they were being unable to attend to their young children or families, will now be able to participate in the workforce. They will also be able to enhance their skills by enrolling themselves in online courses and trainings which will help them in career progression, and provide them

require physical presence at offices for several types of jobs.

This is an opportunity for both women workers and their employers. While women will be able to work from home, organisations will also be able to retain their skilled female workforce. This will help towards higher participation of women in the formal sector jobs. In Bangladesh, women's participation in the labour force has increased significantly during the last five decades. From a mere 4 percent in 1974, women's participation in the labour force has now increased to about 36 percent. Almost 92 percent of those employed in the labour force work in the informal sector without any job guarantee. Also, not many women are working in the senior positions of organisations. Women in decision making jobs are even fewer. In case of technology-based work, women in Bangladesh have even lesser presence. The pandemic has also opened up opportunities for IT based services and businesses. The potential for e-commerce has increased. Unfortunately, not many

sector for female employment is the readymade garments (RMG) factories where female participation was almost 80 percent of all RMG workers initially, but has now declined to about 61 percent, according to a survey by the Centre for Policy Dialogue. This is due to increased automation in the sector.

Therefore, if women are not provided with opportunities for upgrading their technological skills, there will be further inequality. While there is a need for rooting out the cultural barriers through education and awareness building the socio-economic barriers will have to be removed by bringing more women into the formal sector. This will require higher and quality education, and technological capacity development for women in Bangladesh. The theme of the IWD 2021 can be materialised through proactive measures for women during the pandemic and beyond.

Dr Fahmida Khatun is the Executive Director at the Centre for Policy Dialogue. Views expressed in this article are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect the position of her organisation.

'A crisis with a woman's face'



ANTONIO GUTERRES

AS the world marks International Women's Day in the midst of a global pandemic, one stark fact is clear: the Covid-19 crisis has a woman's face.

The pandemic is worsening the already existing deep inequalities facing women and girls, erasing years of progress towards gender equality.

Women are more likely to work in sectors hardest hit by the pandemic. Most essential frontline workers are women—many from racially and ethnically marginalised groups and at the bottom of the economic ladder.

Women are 24 percent more vulnerable to losing their jobs and suffering steeper falls in income. The gender pay gap, already high, has widened, including in the health sector.

Unpaid care has increased dramatically owing to stay-at-home orders and school and childcare closures. Millions of girls may never return to school. Mothers—especially single mothers—have faced acute adversity and anxiety.

The pandemic has also sparked a parallel epidemic of violence against women worldwide, with skyrocketing domestic abuse, trafficking, sexual exploitation and child marriage.

Meanwhile, even though women represent the majority of health care workers, a recent study found that only 3.5 percent of Covid-19 task forces had equal numbers of men and women. In global news coverage of the pandemic, just one of every five expert sources were women.

All of this exclusion is itself an emergency. The world needs a new push to advance women's leadership and equal participation. And it's clear that such action will benefit us all.

The Covid-19 response has highlighted the power and effectiveness of women's



Senior Nurse Runu Veronica Costa gets first coronavirus vaccine shot at Kurmitola General Hospital. Women have been in the frontlines during the pandemic, also during the vaccination programmes.

PHOTO: FACEBOOK

leadership. Over the past year, countries with women leaders have had lower transmission rates and are often better positioned for recovery. Women's organisations have filled crucial gaps in providing critical services and information, especially at the community level.

Across the board, when women lead in government, we see bigger investments in social protection and greater inroads

against poverty. When women are in parliament, countries adopt more stringent policies on climate change. When women are at the peace table, agreements are more enduring.

Yet, women make up a mere quarter of national legislators worldwide, a third of local government members, and just one-fifth of cabinet ministers. On the current trajectory, gender parity will not be reached in national legislatures before

2063. Parity among heads of government would take well over a century.

A better future depends on addressing this power imbalance. Women have an equal right to speak with authority on the decisions that affect their lives. I am proud to have achieved gender parity among the leadership of the United Nations.

Pandemic recovery is our chance to chart a new and equal path. Support and stimulus packages must target women and girls specifically, including through scaled up investment in care infrastructure. The formal economy only functions because it is subsidised by women's unpaid care work.

As we recover from this crisis, we must chart a path to an inclusive, green and resilient future. I call on all leaders to put in place six key building blocks:

First, ensure equal representation—from company boards to parliaments, from higher education to public institutions—through special measures and quotas.

Second, invest significantly in the care economy and social protection, and redefine Gross Domestic Product to make work in the home visible and counted.

Third, remove barriers to women's full inclusion in the economy, including through access to the labour market, property rights and targeted credit and investments.

Fourth, repeal all discriminatory laws in all spheres—from labour and land rights to personal status and protections against violence.

Fifth, each country should enact an emergency response plan to address violence against women and girls, and follow through with funding, policies, and political will to end this scourge.

Sixth, shift mindsets, raise public awareness and call out systemic bias.

The world has an opportunity to leave behind generations of entrenched and systemic discrimination. It is time to build an equal future.

Antonio Guterres is the Secretary-General of the United Nations.