

# Lockdowns in Europe and USA are killing our industry

## Within political parties, it's still a man's world

*Parties must ensure fair representation of women in their committees*

FOR a political party to be truly a people's party, it's imperative that there is fair representation of various sections of the population, including women, within the party hierarchy. However, fair representation—not to be confused with empowerment—may seem like a tall order in a country where equal or proportional representation of women in politics is not even an issue, and where political parties still struggle to fill up the few seats reserved for women within their committees. A recent report by *The Daily Star* shows how far behind the target our major parties are. According to the report, despite there being a prerequisite for the parties' registration to reserve for women at least 33 percent of all committee positions at local and national levels by the end of 2020, almost all of them have failed to do so, and the Election Commission has done little to ensure their compliance.

For example, the ruling Awami League, which claims to be a women-centric party, has only 19 women in its 74-member central committee, averaging 26 percent. In case of BNP, women constitute only 11 percent of its 73-member advisory body, barely reaching the double digits. Among other parties, women constitute 15.8 percent of the 101-member core committee of Jatiya Party (Manju), around 11 percent of the central committee of the Workers Party of Bangladesh, and around 15 percent of the central committee of the Communist Party of Bangladesh (CPB). If this is the situation in the central committees of major political parties, one can safely imagine how poor the percentage of female representation will be in their committees at the grassroots level. The reasons cited by the parties—lack of eligible women leaders or candidates, a general lack of interest from women, etc.—are hard to believe as we have often seen how enthusiastically women sought tickets for party nominations.

While the reserved seats may not be a true measure of women's empowerment, it is a contributing factor and also a cornerstone principle to which all parties have subscribed. True, women's political participation and representation has increased in recent years, but progress has been extremely slow. This is partly due to the unwillingness of the political leadership to create a conducive enabling environment for achieving better gender-balanced representation. Women should be encouraged and enabled to participate more in the democratic processes, including elections as well as party activities, so they can lead the change we so desperately need.

In any case, if there is internal resistance to women's rise to leadership positions, as some parties have claimed, it is the parties' responsibility to remove it through better discipline and more robust gender-sensitive policies. We urge the parties to fulfil their pledge to ensure fair representation of women. Also, the Election Commission must do better to implement the Representation of the People Order, which includes the reservation provision. If the time for compliance is to be extended, the electoral law must be amended so that no breach of its provisions makes it legally irrelevant.

## Outgoing ACC chief's frank admission

*All impediments must be removed to rout corruption*

IT is not often that the outgoing head of a very important state institution admits his failure in fulfilling his mandate. We compliment Iqbal Mahmood, the departing chairman of the Anti-Corruption Commission, for admitting his disappointment and accepting the commission's inability to completely fulfil people's expectations regarding curbing corruption. Mahmood has also admitted that he was free from pressure from the government. If that was the case, may we ask why it was not possible for the ACC to fulfil its mandate? What were the factors that stood in the way of the ACC doing its job to meet people's expectations?

It may be pertinent to mention that the commission had formulated an action plan in 2016 for the years 2017-2021 and had expressed hope that if the commission, with support from all, remained truly committed to executing the action plan within the next five years, the road to developing the required level of capacity to combat, control and prevent corruption would be much easier and smoother. The outgoing ACC chairman's remorse suggests that that was not the case.

We believe it is imperative that the next chairman will delve deeply into the factors that have frustrated the efforts of the ACC to reduce the level of corruption, so that those could be mitigated. We also believe that the commission has a long arm and it must reach and grab every corrupt individual regardless of his or her party affiliation. We should remember that like terrorists, who have no religious identity, corrupt individuals also have no party identity. Like terrorism, corruption threatens the very fabric of the society and the country's economic security. In this regard, we cannot but take issue with him when he said that he had refrained from making any decision when he thought that it might tarnish the image of the country. We believe that no action that is designed to curb corruption can tarnish the image of the country. It cannot be a pleasant experience for the people to see the country's name repeatedly appear amongst the top few countries in the corruption perceptions index. And that, we believe, is what tarnishes the image of the country.

It is true that it is not possible for the ACC to rid the country of corruption all by itself. It has been ingrained in the system, and the worst-afflicted are the agencies and certain institutions of the state. The administration should play a supportive role to enable the commission to do its job. The society as a whole must also rise in unison to get rid of corruption. The government should play the part of the facilitator so that each segment's work can become a coherent effort towards achieving the final result.

RMG  
NOTES

MOSTAFIZ UDDIN

FOR 12 months now, the global fashion industry has been in a state of flux. Shops are opened, shops are closed. They are reopened, then they are closed again. This story is playing out throughout the world, in the US, Europe and beyond.

Of course, we all know why this is happening and we all understand that the pandemic has necessitated a requirement for lockdowns (although I have yet to see evidence of the impact of lockdowns). The question we all need to start asking now is, how much longer can shops remain closed? The impact of these lockdowns is profound—for brands and retailers themselves, many of whom have already gone bust; and for their suppliers, most of which are clinging on by the skin of their teeth.

Plenty of scientists and health professionals are arguing the case for lockdown, and I understand that—that is their job. But who is arguing the case for businesses? Who is standing up for the retailers upon which millions of people depend for employment and to keep a roof over their heads? It seems that, right

*What will the new normal be like for supply chains in Asia? At this rate, this new normal is going to be millions of people made unemployed with no social security or safety net. Many will face poverty and destitution.*

now, nobody dare raise the question. Coronavirus is all anybody talks about.

And yet, the fashion industry itself does not have a magic money tree to keep it afloat. In many cases, the money ran out last year and businesses are surviving on loans and government handouts or by trimming their operations. Many high street department stores have closed their doors permanently as a direct result of lockdowns which were introduced

pleading with them to reopen fashion stores in their respective countries. My message to them is simple: these lockdowns are killing our industry. We cannot keep treading water indefinitely. I am unsure at times whether public officials understand what it is like to run a business. When they implement these lockdowns, we can't just switch off operations. We still have bills to pay, workers who need wages.

What is worse is the lack of communication from governments. People are trying to run businesses but how can they do that when they don't know if their retail outlets will be allowed to open from one week to the next? Nobody I talk to has a clue about what is happening or when normal business might resume. Many retailers only dare place tiny orders with their suppliers as they fear having another cancelled order crisis on their hands.

All of us in the industry have been living in a limbo for 12 months now. At some stage, surely life has to return to some kind of normalcy, doesn't it? Or is this it now, for good?

Even with vaccines being rolled out, I hear talk of new coronavirus variants and the need to "take things slow". Every time it looks like shops might re-open, another obstacle seems to be placed in the way. Are we now being asked to write off 2021 as well as 2020?

There is a lot of talk about the new normal. Well, my question is this: what will the new normal be like for supply chains in Asia? At this rate, this new normal is going to be millions of people made unemployed with no social security or safety net. Many will face poverty and destitution. In fact, this story is already playing out in countries such as ours, India and Pakistan.

Coronavirus is a killer, but so is poverty, and let us not be in any doubt about this. There are statistics which show that for every percentage increase in unemployment, there is a corresponding increase in national deaths. These statistics are borne out on a country-wide basis. I dread to think about what kind of impact the "response to the" coronavirus will have on South Asian garment production hubs in terms of indirect deaths caused. We are looking at a serious humanitarian crisis.

My message here is simple: this has gone on for 12 months. People can't hide away forever (and after all, other viruses may well come along in future). As an industry, we need to find our voice and tell the governments it's time to get on with business.

At this rate, it is starting to feel like the cure is worse than the disease as far as the coronavirus is concerned.

Mostafiz Uddin is the Managing Director of Denim Expert Limited. He is also the Founder and CEO of Bangladesh Apparel Exchange (BAE).



Garment workers wait for their salary in front of a factory in the Ashulia industrial belt on the outskirts of Dhaka.

PHOTO:  
COLLECTED

in the run up to Christmas. Why close clothing stores right before Christmas (while, meanwhile, people were crammed into supermarkets and malls in their thousands)? Where is the rationale? It's impossible to see any.

There are huge ramifications to these lockdowns. Have they been thought through? Everywhere I look, I see jobs being lost and businesses closed. It's carnage for us as suppliers and for our brand/retailer customers. Of course, some have done well out of all this, especially online-only retailers. There is a booming leisure-wear market and, of course, the market for protective facemasks continues to grow. For the rest of us, it's a battle to stay alive when fashion stores all over the world are closed. We simply cannot continue like this, and years—even decades—of hard work building up a business are being tossed into the bin.

This past week, I have written to the governments of Germany and Holland

Those of us reading this may think I am being selfish and reckless with these requests. They will point to the millions of people who have died of coronavirus or who are ill with "Long Covid". Let me be clear here: I am fully aware of the risks and I also understand totally why lockdowns have been introduced (and the huge pressure governments have been on to implement them).

But I also talk to a lot of brands and retailers and many other people in the industry. The messages I get back are of confusion. Every day, they see people swarming around cities, mixing on public transport or in supermarkets (many of which are selling clothing!). People are mixing in parks and other public places. Schools are open in many countries. And yet, through all this, governments continue to squeeze the life out of fashion retail. What on earth is going? Where is the consistency? Our industry feels like it has been completely forgotten.

# How do we tap into the global investment market?

*Are Green Bonds the answer?*

POLITICS OF  
CLIMATE CHANGE

SALEEMUL HUQ

AS the Padma Bridge nears completion, the south western region of Bangladesh is poised for greater development as the bridge will connect it to Dhaka. The south western region of Bangladesh also contains the Sundarbans mangrove forest, which is the biggest mangrove forest in the world and is a World Heritage Site. Hence, our responsibility to protect the Sundarbans is not just for ourselves but for all of mankind.

However, if the region is allowed to develop through haphazard and uncontrolled setting up of factories and polluting companies around the outskirts of the Sundarbans, that will inevitably lead to its decline. This is indeed where we are headed if suitable policies and actions are not taken quickly. Once the polluting industries are established, it will be almost impossible to get rid of them.

Hence, we need to think of ways to encourage environment and eco-friendly industries and commerce while discouraging bad industries.

One way to encourage such eco-friendly industries would be by providing them with finance at a low interest rate through the development of a Sundarbans Green Bond of say, USD two billion which could be raised from the global investment world.

Although I am not an investment expert, I have been looking at this option

*Hence, we need to think of ways to encourage environment and eco-friendly industries and commerce while discouraging bad industries.*

and talking to some national as well as international experts who have supported the idea.

I will try to outline the basic elements of how it might work. Let me start by saying that there is a global investment world with trillions of dollars available to invest in good quality sovereign or Green Bonds which Bangladesh has not yet tapped into. As Bangladesh graduates out of the Least Developed Country (LDC)

Bangladesh, so there is some familiarity with this idea already in the country. However, these opportunities have only been taken up by a relatively small number of commercial banks.

Therefore, what would be required for the launching of a successful Green Bond would be for a significant number of public as well as private banks in Bangladesh to join forces and with the support of the Bangladesh Bank in designing such a

However, for this to succeed, there also has to be policy support to prevent polluting industries from being established in the region. Without a negative list of industries, it may not be possible to prevent them from going ahead. This should be possible by enforcing the provision of the Ecological Protected sites law that already exists but is seldom implemented.

An additional aspect of the types



Our responsibility to protect the Sundarbans is not just for ourselves but for all of mankind.

PHOTO: STAR

status soon, we should look at tapping into this global investment world.

Recently, Indonesia launched a Green Sukuk Bond that raised more than a billion USD to promote both green as well as halal industries and commercial activities. Both green as well as Islamic Sukuk investments require the adoption of a negative list of industries that are not allowed, such as the production of alcohol, guns, and other polluting industries, while at the same time, having a positive list of non-polluting and eco-friendly industries, which are allowed to get access to loans on competitive terms.

Bangladesh Bank has offered low interest rate loans to commercial banks to support a positive list of industries in

Green Bond. To make it attractive to global investors, the bond should have both an assured revenue generating stream to repay investors and, at the same time, also invest in genuinely green activities.

My proposal, therefore, is that we try to design a Green Bond called the Sundarbans Green Bond, which would be invested in eco-friendly industries that are developed in the south western region of Bangladesh around the world's largest mangrove forest—such as eco-tourism and other non-polluting industries. This would not only have the benefit of protecting a World Heritage Site, but would also generate a stream of profit and revenue with which the bond holders could be repaid.

of investment that can be encouraged would be ones that enhance resilience to the negative impacts of climate change in that region, which is already suffering from salinity intrusion. Hence, investment in saline tolerant agriculture and aquaculture as well as in provision of clean drinking water would all qualify as being green investments, while also helping the local population to adapt to the adverse impacts of climate change.

It is, of course, not going to be easy to pull off such a major new kind of investment instrument, but it seems to be something worth looking at.

Saleemul Huq is Director of the International Centre for Climate Change and Development at the Independent University Bangladesh.