

# The Daily Star

FOUNDER EDITOR  
LATE S. M. ALI

DHAKA SUNDAY JUNE 13, 2021, JAISHTHA 30, 1428 BS

## Little to no progress in ending hazardous child labour

*Who's to blame, the pandemic or project officials' inefficiency?*

We are dismayed at the sluggish progress of a government project (taken up over three years ago) aimed at taking children out of hazardous labour by 2020. The Tk 284 crore project, named "Eradication of Hazardous Child Labour in Bangladesh (4th phase)", passed its deadline as 2020 ended at only 1.33 percent completion—according to a recent Implementation Monitoring and Evaluation Division (IMED) report.

Meanwhile, one of the most devastating effects of the pandemic has been the increase in child labour (in formal and informal sectors), as children joined the workforce to help provide for their struggling families. Prolonged school closures and lack of access to online education only gave way to this issue. A survey by Manusher Jonno Foundation (MJF) found that, of 30,313 children who were engaged in hazardous jobs in the first half of last year, about 7,800 had moved to even riskier jobs by September 2020. The study also found that child abuse in the workplace had increased by 137 percent due to this surge in child labour.

Had the project by the labour and employment ministry (with national-level NGOs concerned with child labour) been completed on time, around one lakh would have had "six months' non-formal education and four months' skills development training, and a monthly stipend of Tk 1,000". 10,000 of the trainees would have been provided Tk 15,000 as seed money, and the employment record of the one lakh children would have been tracked in a database.

While a new deadline of December 2021 has been set, we find the project officials' reasoning, that the pandemic is solely to blame for such a delay, a bit hard to believe. Towards the end of last year, many industries and businesses (public and private) had begun operating in a close to normal manner. So it is strange that a project meant to deal with the growing and urgent issue of increasing child labour in hazardous areas should have a near-static rate of progress. An initial list of 112 NGOs meant to work on the project is yet to be approved by the cabinet committee, according to the project director. The request for proposals (RFP) by the NGOs had arrived in June 2020.

We would urge the government and the labour and employment ministry specifically to avoid any further delays of this project. The issue of increasing child labour and resultant abuse requires urgent action. Children must somehow be sent back to schools, families must be made more aware about the long-term impacts of hazardous child labour. But most importantly, the government must be diligent in creating better options for these children and their families so that these children are not forced to take up jobs that risk their wellbeing.

## Cruelty towards household staff must stop

*Bring domestic workers under legal framework*

We are appalled by the cruelty of an employer's daughter towards 18-year-old Miyasa, a house staff. The 27-year-old woman scalded Miyasa by pouring boiling rice foam on her causing severe burns. It is by sheer fluke that Miyasa was rescued by police after a 999 call they received.

One cannot help but wonder what would have happened if that call had not gone through? Miyasa had been working for a year in that house so it is likely that she has suffered torture before. It may seem shocking to some that employers can treat their household staff in this way but the truth is that there are hundreds of child and adult domestic workers who are not treated like human beings. There have been innumerable news reports of employers and their relatives inflicting the most inhumane torture—burning child workers with an iron or heated steel spatula, tearing of hair, beating them, throwing them off the terrace—there is no limit to the types of brutality. The death of a domestic worker, usually a child, or her rescue by the police are the only times we get to know about it through media reports. The rest of the time there is total silence and nobody knows what happens behind the closed doors.

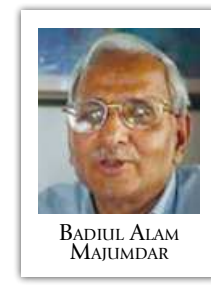
The reason why these crimes continue with impunity are many. Domestic work is part of the informal sector so there is no regulatory framework to stipulate minimum age of employment, minimum pay, working hours or weekly holidays. But more frightening is that workers have absolutely no protection against torture or sexual abuse. Live in domestic workers—especially child workers—are the most vulnerable to these abuses though even adult workers face physical and verbal abuse.

Unfortunately the state has given very little attention to the rights of domestic workers reflecting the apathy of the society as a whole, towards them. In 2015 the Bangladesh government approved the draft Domestic Workers Protection and Welfare Policy but this remains unimplemented and does not include minimum wage and working hours.

It is time to acknowledge that child domestic work has to be eliminated as it is hazardous and inhumane and in most cases deprives the child of basic rights to education and care. We must also incorporate domestic work under a legal framework where working hours, minimum pay and paid leave (including weekly holidays) are spelt out. The government must then enforce these laws and penalise employers who flout them.

The specific cases of domestic workers being abused or killed have to be prosecuted by the state as we have seen all too often how cases are not followed through because the employer has "managed" the situation by paying some money to the victim or the victim's family who are poor and powerless. Until these torturers are brought to book and there are laws to protect the rights of domestic workers, there will be many child and adult domestic workers who will be vulnerable to all kinds of abuse.

# Budget ignores the interests of the common people



him for this honour. But regrettably I am unable to felicitate him for his budget because it ignores the interests of the common people.

The reason for ignoring the common people in the budget is the government's erroneous notion that infrastructure building is "development". Building infrastructure is attractive because it can be seen, touched, big money can be spent on it, and used for doling out patronage and giving undue benefits to the chosen ones. But true development represents improvements in people's state of wellbeing, which largely depends on progress in education, health, nutrition, women's conditions, employment and so on, for which infrastructure building is also essential.

Because of the government's priority for infrastructure developments, its budgets are not generally designed to cause significant improvements in people's wellbeing, and this year's budget is no different. The minister has unhesitatingly admitted that his budget is "business friendly", rather than people friendly. In other words, the budget has again been developed to serve the interests of a few, without giving due priority to common people's health, education, employment needs and the like.

This is not surprising as almost the whole country is now run for the benefit of special interest groups, such as businessmen. Businessmen not only overly influence our economic policymaking, but they also dominate our politics so much so that our parliaments can now be viewed as the extension of the FBCCI. I am all for giving incentives to businesses for stimulating investment and employment—however, I am opposed to the politicisation of business and mingling business with politics, which causes de-politicisation and other anomalies, putting in the back burner common people's interests.

Government functionaries represent another interest group, a large segment of which has been instrumental in bringing the present regime to power. The government has also been generous to the functionaries, many of whom violated laws and committed electoral crimes, the punishment for which, according to the RPO, is 2-7 years of imprisonment along

with fines.

In the last decade, the government's expenditure for salaries and benefits increased by 211 percent. Even in the current fiscal year of coronavirus pandemic, which has caused widespread economic devastations and pushed about two and a half crore Bangladeshis below the poverty-line, the raise in their salary and benefits continued. In 2021-22, increases in their salary and benefits will continue at 3

good governance principles.

If we are to increase the budget implementation rate and safeguard the interests of the people, we must overhaul and strengthen our largely dysfunctional governance system. The governance system stands on three important pillars: appropriate laws and rules and their applications in the interest of the people; effective systems and procedures; and well-functioning and non-partisan institutions.

virus and getting sick.

The increased risks of the common people can be effectively confronted by breaking the chain of infection and stopping the que to hospitals. This chain can be broken by preventive measures, such as adherence to health regulations, including behavioural change of the people; isolation of the infected patients; putting in quarantine those who are suspected of being infected; and



percent, accounting for 19 percent—and with the addition of pension costs 26.7 percent—of the total cost of governing, which is projected to be about Tk 3 lakh 66 thousand. Thus, even though general people are struggling from the devastations of the pandemic, the functionaries will continue to be well taken care of by their political bosses.

Despite spending such huge amounts for the functionaries, the implementation rate of our budget is quite dismal, giving rise to the concern that we may be rearing a white elephant. More seriously, the government functionaries are now increasingly getting involved in corrupt activities, notwithstanding the ever-increasing costs of employing them, siphoning off resources which could be used for the benefits of the common people. Furthermore, because of the government's continuing dependence on it, the bureaucracy, rather than the citizens themselves, has been increasingly becoming more powerful, which is inconsistent with democratic norms and

There have been continued erosion in all these areas in our country, threatening people's wellbeing. A dysfunctional governance system, along with the spread of corruption and plundering, lack of rule of law and violation of human rights, harm the interests of the common people. On the other hand, the privileged generally thrive in a state of poor governance. Unfortunately, the proposed budget provides no roadmap for addressing the burgeoning governance failures in our country.

The apparent reason for making the budget business friendly is to protect livelihoods, but livelihood is meaningless unless you are alive. The common people, because of their lower level of education and awareness, are inherently at greater risk of being infected by the coronavirus. In addition, the "social determinants of health", representing the conditions in which people are born, grow, live, work and age also put the poorer segment of the population at greater risk of catching the

increasing the vaccination coverage. The universal vaccination coverage within the shortest time is one sure way to protect the common people from the threat of the virus. But the finance minister has proposed to give vaccines only to 25 lakh people per month, most of which are likely to go to the privileged people, depriving the poor. Vaccinating at this rate would take several years to cover everyone, which will also increase the health risks for the poor. It should be noted that the rich will not be affected by the unavailability of vaccines because they can go abroad to take vaccines or arrange to bring vaccines to Bangladesh for their own use. Furthermore, the poor when they get sick, have no access to overcrowded hospitals. Thus, the finance minister has acted against the interests of the common people by not allocating enough money for vaccinating everyone quickly.

Dr Badrul Alam Majumdar, Secretary, SHUJAN: Citizens for Good Governance.

## Lessons, Reversals and Truth



RUBANA HUQ

We are living in a time of self-doubt, of suspicion, of negation, and of regret.

We are also living in times which call for self-immersion. Problem is,

when many of us talk to our own selves, living in isolation, few of us end up in a conversation with the other half of ourselves, which challenges, taunts and puts the other half to shame. Truth is, in the times of pandemic, there are no final verdicts; no inevitable deductions or resolutions. We are passing through a limbo which teases our sensibilities to unbearable extremes and thereafter swings them back to routine doldrums. Amidst all this, we seek solace in our vaccines, aesthetic masks, cautious hugs, limited proximities, and privacy. And the end of each day, we hope to have learnt a lesson.

These times also have an appetite for endless dichotomies and reversals. At the crack of dawn everyday, I wake up and begin an endless tirade with my own self, trying to understand and pinpoint which dots in our reality graph will be able to withstand waves of critical thought swimming all across social media and if ever these dots will actually translate to data. Probably not. "Nobody knows"—is what we know today. What was taught to us eons ago, needs a reassessment or be endorsed by the audience. I mention "audience" as most of what we see is simulation and we are all at play without rehearsals.

Let me begin with the case of just being honest, without the fear of being reprimanded. I mention fear because there is a crippling self-censorship that cuts into most of our ink and we end up with a partial view of the horizon that so deserves to be shared.

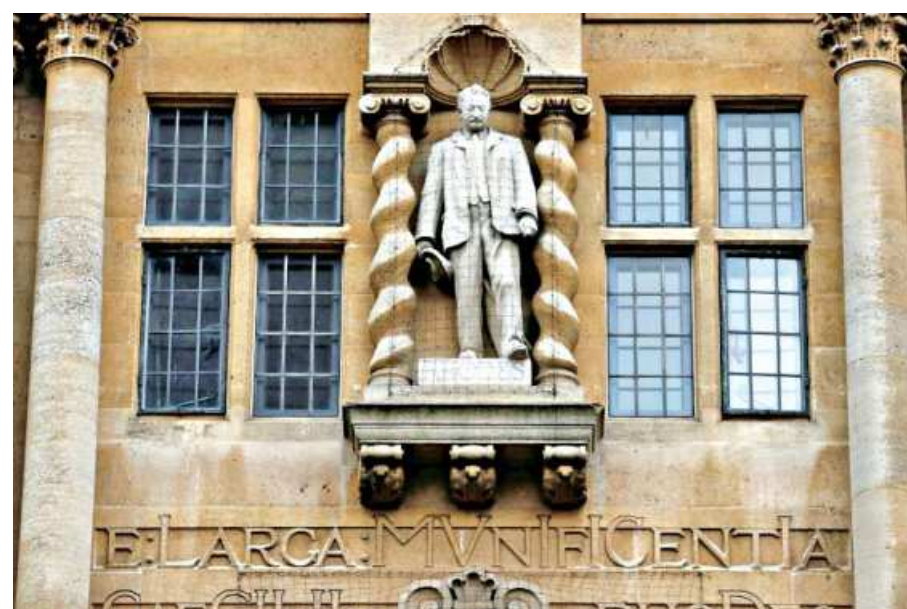
For the last two years, your columnist had steered a trade association that was historically dominated by men. When she stepped in to the office, the very first day, in her drawer, the only item she had found was a cap...a man's cap. Wearing a man's "cap" was certainly not her idea of running the show; so instead, she wore her sari and worked like any woman would. During the tenure, many lessons were learnt and unlearned. A seat, a position, a space, a

corner was key and occupying the same was the first and foremost challenge of all. Let's take the example of "chair..."

Imagine 10 chairs on the stage. Seating is pre-decided and she knows that all eyes are on her. Not just because she is a woman, but because she is intimidating for many. As a woman, she is not supposed to be on her own, but is supposed to be seeking help. She is also supposed to appear helpless, spineless and only

been quiet when a seat around the table for a woman was challenged...

A week ago, the world's number two Naomi Osaka withdrew from the French Open after the controversy over her refusal to speak to the media at the tournament. In a tweet announcing the move, Japan's Osaka also said she had "suffered long bouts of depression" since winning her first Grand Slam title in 2018. The 23-year-old said last week she would not do news



A statue of Cecil Rhodes, a controversial historical figure, is seen outside Oriel College in Oxford, Britain, June 11, 2020.

PHOTO: REUTERS

"collaborative." That's also because she is a woman. Collaboration for a woman means depending on males for advice and "guidance." She is never left alone and taunted for being educated. Basically, she can't have brains or courage. She can only be allowed to be frail and at fault.

Phew. Two months ago, #GiveHerASeat had hit the media storm.

Ursula von der Leyen, president of the European Commission, and her colleague Charles Michel, president of the European Council, while meeting with Turkey's President Recep Tayyip Erdogan, ran out of seats in the meeting room, two seats were situated between the EU and Turkish flags. Michel was given one, and Erdogan took the other, leaving von der Leyen standing awkwardly, only to find a spot on a sofa, several feet away. This had given birth to new movement in social media which possibly resonates with many of us who have had awkward moments and have

conferences at Roland Garros to protect her mental health. Many stuck by her.

Coco Gauff, American world number 25: "Stay strong. I admire your vulnerability." Billie Jean King said all should give her space and time. But a few thought that it was unprofessional of her to have withdrawn as her stress relating to the public appearance was all part of the deal. That's it. Womanhood is a part of a deal that Eve signed off long ago. And Adams have so far enjoyed the super sport. As a woman, all Osaka seeks is a room to retreat to, a room which is averse to exposure. All she wanted was her headphones to shut out the noise, the buzz and the light of fame. And yet, all as a woman, she mostly received was rebuke...

My face just broke into smile as soon I heard the next news on television. I watched a woman altercation with the police. It was the Al Jazeera Arabic female journalist Givara Budeiri. Budeiri had left hospital after receiving treatment

for injuries sustained during her arrest by Israeli forces. She was arrested while covering a demonstration in the occupied East Jerusalem neighbourhood of Sheikh Jarrah, which has been the focus of protests for weeks in support of Palestinian families facing forced expulsion. Her left hand was fractured when she was arrested. It has been almost 21 years since Budeiri had joined Al Jazeera. But today, after hearing her screaming at the Israeli police, I felt alive...

When will humanity ever apologise for atrocities committed in the garb of authoritarianism?

While your columnist stares at the Regent's Park and is finishing her column sitting under a tree, the discussion on Cecil Rhodes' statue at Oriel College, Oxford is taking London by storm.

Mr Rhodes, a 19th century imperialist, who established the British colony of Rhodesia, set up the diamond company De Beers and also left a 100,000 pounds for Oxford to start the Rhodes scholarship, which is now a major centre of debate. While students have long demanded his statue to be taken down, the sculptor Antony Gormley has proposed that the statue should be turned to face the wall in collective shame. We can only hope that lessons are learnt and men of power, the juggernauts of this era, realise that power is short lived and there is no excuse for the imperialistic sinners.

While I write this, I am also harshly reminded of the possibility of revisions. I went and visited the exhibition on Nero in the British Museum yesterday. The exhibition was all about a new angle, about Nero, the matricidal megalomaniac being a caring populist. Apparently the recent researches indicate that Nero was unpopular amongst merely the elites and that the rest of his subjects were in awe of the young ruler. At the end of the exhibition, I remained unconvinced.

For me and many others, what mattered then and now is the sheer thirst and quest for justice; nothing less and certainly nothing more. Covid has stripped a layer off our entities. Much of what couldn't be shared earlier, can be shared now. After all, there's no shame in shaming the different faces of apparent civility steeped in duplicity and hypocrisy. There's simply no shame in Truth.

Dr Rubana Huq is the Managing Director of Mohammedi Group and former President of BGMEA. Her Twitter handle is @RubanaH.