

WORLD YOUTH SKILLS DAY

Time to support and reskill domestic workers

AYESHA ISLAM and TASMIAH T RAHMAN

AMID the ongoing restrictions meant to reduce the transmission of Covid-19, 32-year-old Nasima Begum, living with her husband and two sons in a Hazaribagh slum, has been finding it very difficult to make ends meet. In early 2020, she and her husband (a rickshaw puller) would earn about Tk 10,500 each month. But the onset of the pandemic and subsequent lockdowns decreased her family income to Tk 4,000. In 2021, the family income continued to decline as she was unable to find suitable house work regularly, as private households have been unwilling to give her full-time work. Employers would engage her for a few hours, and now that the country has gone into another lockdown, she has been asked not to come, leaving her without an income. She also borrowed money from neighbours and relatives which she needs to pay back. With loans mounting, and her landlord collecting full rent by the first week of each month, Nasima continues to borrow money and food, albeit with great difficulty. Despite this, Nasima has not received aid from any organisation till now. Often, she says, some people come and list her name but the aid never reaches her.



Amid the ongoing coronavirus curbs, domestic workers, mostly women and often relatively young, are finding it very difficult to make ends meet. PHOTO: STAR FILE

This is not just the case of Nasima but thousand others like her. A recent quantitative survey among 56 such women in Dhaka—whose primary occupation is domestic work—revealed that about 54 percent of families' primary breadwinners lost their jobs due to the pandemic. Most had spent their savings during the first wave, and almost 70 percent of households don't have any savings left to spend. As such, more than 79 percent of those surveyed said their food consumption has changed drastically. Most have welcomed the government's subsidised food shops. The last wave led many people to move to their villages, but many don't have family ties to fall back on. Many complain that relatives at village homes do not appreciate this move, and often urban slum-dwellers face harassment from their own family members.

In such a situation, many have thought of switching their jobs, with the general preference being the ready-made garments (RMG) industry, even though this sector too has been struggling amid coronavirus curbs. Many women are looking for opportunities at offices and hospitals to work as a cleaner, or seeking self-employment through stitching or small-scale farming jobs. Apart from their daily struggles, about 82 percent of the families' children are not going to schools. They are passing their time by playing, watching television or helping their parents earn. The remaining 18 percent are receiving tuition at home. Very few children are going to the informal schools run by non-profit organisations within the slums. Nasima claims that her two sons have lost their focus on education and even face risk of dropout because they have lost the habit of going to

school. **What can be done to support them?** Amidst this dreadful situation, the national budget for the fiscal year 2021-22 offered a ray of hope. The only section where domestic workers have been addressed directly is under the natural calamities' fund of Tk 5,000 crore, along with day-labourers, farmers and victims of natural calamities. Another fund of Tk 7.27 crore has been allocated for the development of the living standards of 30,000 marginal communities. Similarly, different funds have been allocated under the government's Social Protection Programme for vulnerable group feeding, vulnerable group development, urban-based marginal women's development, among others. But to get a portion of these funds, domestic workers have to compete with other marginalised groups and informal workers. Given this situation, a specific fund

targeting domestic workers can significantly ease their pain. Along with the emergency support, a systematic upskilling programme geared towards domestic workers can also be planned, which would help about 2 million of domestic workers (mostly women and relatively young like Nasima), according to Domestic Workers' Rights Network. One of the steps required to build their resilience is linking them with platforms like Sheba.xyz, Hello Task, etc. These platforms can connect employers with the workers, satisfying their respective needs. For example, during the pandemic, most of the clients have restricted domestic workers' access to their homes due to the fear of Covid-19 spread. The platforms can ensure periodic tests for the workers by partnering with government-run testing booths where Covid-19 testing can be made free for them. Ensuring proper hygiene practices can be made mandatory during the training sessions. Also a certain portion of wages of the workers can be routed to banks/microfinance organisations/mobile wallets so that women like Nasima can get into the habit of saving. Moreover, the government can support these

platforms to provide social safety net support to the domestic workers in terms of insurance, medical aid, children's education, etc. Abuse of domestic workers at their workplaces is nothing new in Bangladesh. Although in 2015 the government had approved the Domestic Workers' Protection and Welfare Policy, hardly any success can be seen in terms of justice for the harassed workers. Also, decent work indicators such as fair pay, fair work hour, fair management, among others, are almost invisible in their profession. Therefore, these platforms with their innovative technologies can play a significant role in improving the overall service and the plight of those involved. Online platforms for domestic work-related services also need to be built with a focus on the needs and priorities of these women. For instance, they don't want to travel far for work. Also, their wages have to justify their work hours and travel hours. On the other hand, domestic workers need to be trained on how to behave professionally with their employers and have the openness to be multi-skilled, which is essential under the changing circumstances. They can be encouraged to receive training in the BTEB-accredited caregiving course. As the elderly population is growing worldwide, as well as in Bangladesh, domestic workers through this course may be up-skilled to be caregivers for the elderly, so they can measure their blood pressure, temperature, and weight, and aid in their physical exercise. These multi-skilling provisions, if opened for domestic workers, can help people like Nasima expand their employment option at different homes or hospitals. The possibility of such formal training can also be considered in case of child care, disability care, youth addiction centres, etc. This will help people like Nasima regain or retain gainful employment even under difficult circumstances.

Ayesha Islam and Tasmiah T Rahman are Deputy Manager and In-Charge respectively of the BRAC Skills Development Programme. The authors acknowledge contributions of research done as part of a project called CHACRI (Choosing Household Work as a Career to Raise Income), a pilot initiative of BRAC Skills Development Programme.

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Reimagining Youth Skills Post-Pandemic



SUDIPTO MUKERJEE

In a rapidly changing world, the youth are typically the first to adapt. They have been at the forefront of change, leadership and entrepreneurship especially since the advent of the Internet, coming up with creative solutions to modern problems. But even the generally unstoppable youth of this world hit a roadblock during the global catastrophe caused by Covid-19. In Bangladesh alone, nearly 38 million students are missing out on proper learning and peer interactions since the closure of educational institutions in March 2020. As of June 2021, Unesco estimates that nearly 157 million learners were affected globally due to full school closures in 19 countries. Meanwhile, ILO estimates that globally, youth employment fell by 8.7 percent last year, which is five percentage points higher than the corresponding figure for older persons in the workforce. In a climate as challenging as the one created by the Covid-19 pandemic, World Youth Skills Day presents the opportunity to put the youth at the centre of our discourse on the recovery of the labour market through skill-building. It also offers us an opportunity to pay tribute to the resilience and creativity of young people around the globe amidst the raging pandemic.

Since July 15 was declared as World Youth Skills Day by the United Nations General Assembly in 2014, this day has provided an opportunity not only for the youth, but also for technical and vocational education and training (TVET) institutions, firms, employers' and workers' organisations, policymakers as well as development partners to engage in much-needed dialogue on preparing young people for the labour market of the future to ensure a more sustainable and equal world.

In Bangladesh, such dialogue and discourse are particularly important, considering that 15 percent of the youth

who were employed before the pandemic are presently out of jobs. Those who could retain or regain employment have had to settle for average incomes that are 11 percent below their pre-Covid earnings, according to a study by the Brac Institute of Governance and Development. From a gender perspective, the situation is dire—a third of young women who were employed before the pandemic were already out of jobs in January 2021. Income loss for women was twice that of men, at 21 percent and 10 percent respectively. Such disparity in terms of impacts not only puts a damper on Bangladesh's progress in the front of gender equality, but also threatens the realisation of several Sustainable Development Goals.

Nearly one-third of the country's population is aged 18-35. These millions of youth could become a demographic dividend in the country's journey towards the SDGs, only if we can provide them with the correct resources and access to opportunities. This World Youth Skills Day, we must understand that Bangladesh's economic recovery in a post-pandemic world largely depends on its youth. In this context, we have to reimagine the role and scope of our digital infrastructure

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People, many of them young men, wait at a playground in the capital's Siddheswari area to receive help amid the ongoing lockdown to curb Covid-19 transmission, on July 8, 2021. PHOTO: ANISUR RAHMAN

and educational and public institutions to ensure economic recovery and set the right priorities to emerge stronger in a post-Covid world. We must prioritise addressing the fast-growing digital divide that is causing millions of youths to be left behind from economic opportunities.

Following the onset of the pandemic, the government of Bangladesh promptly arranged for classes to be broadcast via television during the school closure, and universities adopted online teaching methods. But multiple studies conducted at different points of the pandemic found a clear digital divide between privileged and lower-income households, with the latter having significantly lower access to television, Internet and alternative learning methods. Recovering from this extreme disruption to education will not be easy, but it's possible

with a concerted effort from the government and its development partners. Multiple UNDP projects have been aiding left-behind communities in remote areas to access online education through multimedia set-ups. Learning has to be incentivised for students if needed, and they must be made aware of the importance of digital education and skills training in a rapidly changing, technology-dependent world.

Next, the youth must be given employment opportunities in a variety of sectors. UNDP brought together the government, private sector and development partners as a coalition to accelerate Bangladesh's economic growth by creating decent work and entrepreneurship opportunities for young people. This coalition envisions enabling economic opportunities for all in Bangladesh by 2041. In an increasingly competitive

post-pandemic labour market, this coalition aims to enable skill-based employment for Bangladeshi youth.

When it comes to skill-building, the importance of technical and vocational education and training (TVET) cannot be understated. TVET opens up a world of possibilities for the average youth, including the chance of self-employment. Especially during a pandemic when millions of youth are not in education, employment and training, TVET can create opportunities for people of all socioeconomic classes. It is also a major focus of SDG-4, so improving the quality of and access to technical and vocational education will be key to Bangladesh realising the global goals by 2030.

Not only should we encourage our youth to learn new skills, but we should also equip them with the right resources to use those skills in the real world. UNDP is working with the government and partners to co-create a platform for young entrepreneurs and change-makers seeking to improve our digital spaces, while supporting the start-ups that work towards the SDGs. The government's a2i initiative, supported by UNDP, has been involved in bringing young people's innovative business ideas to life since its inception. Such platforms and initiatives help the youth feel empowered to be at the forefront of the SDGs, while also giving them a chance to contribute to the LDC graduation and other longer-term development aspirations of the country.

Bangladesh's demographic dividend can only be meaningfully realised if the youth are enabled to become future leaders and change-makers. And that can happen only if our society, public and private institutions, and educational institutions make future-focused investments and in turn ensure a quicker recovery from the severe damage that the pandemic has been causing both here and across the globe.

Sudipto Mukerjee is the Resident Representative of the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) in Bangladesh.

QUOTABLE Quote

RICHARD FEYNMAN
American physicist (1918 – 1988)

For a successful technology, reality must take precedence over public relations, for Nature cannot be fooled.

CROSSWORD BY THOMAS JOSEPH

ACROSS

- 1 Rum-soaked cake
- 5 Keyboard bar
- 11 Spoken
- 12 Mysterious
- 13 Casino cubes
- 14 Whirlpool
- 15 Shaggy ox
- 16 Made baskets
- 17 Put away
- 19 Punch sound
- 22 Sub-merged
- 24 Tennis star Osaka
- 26 Swift horse
- 27 Throw in the towel
- 28 Artist Albers
- 30 Quests
- 31 Sturdy wood
- 32 In the lead
- 34 Russian ruler
- 35 Texas's Houston
- 38 Get Hidden mic
- 42 Lumber work
- 43 Look lewdly
- 44 Plug parts
- 45 Macramé unit

DOWN

- 1 Anatomy subject
- 2 Verdi creation
- 3 URL part
- 4 Brewpub order
- 5 Relish
- 6 Shown to be true
- 7 Plot size
- 8 Purr producer
- 9 Hydrocarbon
- 10 Writer Stout
- 16 "Holy smokes!"
- 18 Start of a Hamlet line
- 19 Hashtag part
- 20 Leave out
- 21 Funny folks
- 22 Mexican peninsula
- 23 Winged archer
- 25 Blue hue
- 29 Disconcerting
- 30 That woman
- 33 Puts up
- 34 Abel's brother
- 36 Singer Guthrie
- 37 Get together
- 38 African cobra
- 39 Sea rover
- 40 First prime number
- 41 Stir-fry pan

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BEETLE BAILEY

YESTERDAY'S ANSWERS

M O M S A B B O T
I R I S H H A I T I
T A K E A T O L L O N
E T A W A Y M L O G
R E D O A K M O L E
D O G I E E W E S
L I A R S
R I S E T O A S T
A C E S T R U S T E D
T E E F I T O N A
T A G E A P E E K A T
N E R D S S O R T S

BY MORT WALKER

BY KIRKMAN & SCOTT