The shunned, invisible cleaners of our city

AFIA JAHIN

AS a child, my weekday dawns consisted of walking five or so minutes to the spot from where my school bus would pick me up. Most days were humid, some pouring, and very few freezing. But during practically every wait at the bus stop, I would see a handful of women and men in sleeveless, buttonless coats made of the cheapest cotton (passing as "protective gear"), sweeping dust and human-made garbage off the already busy main road and gathering those in clattering push-carts. Their collection would shortly be taken to the huge garbage bin nearby where the entire area's waste would go, too. Unsurprisingly, when I would sometimes have to walk past them or when they would be working close to me, my guardian would caution me to not accidentally brush up against the *jharuwali* and I would comply.

Besides street sweepers, Bangladesh has a wide array of subsections under the banner of "cleaner"—all of whom do jobs that no one would do willingly and tasks that pay a pittance. Their work mostly consists of garbage collecting and reselling and cleaning/unclogging drains and toilets. Sounds simple enough when put like that, but underneath the concise wording are thousands of stories of unjust, even cruel, working conditions. A series of articles published by *The Daily Star* (as part of its campaign with WaterAid Bangladesh and the Embassy of Sweden called "The Untold Stories of Sanitation and Waste Workers") on June 29 shed light on the lives of individual workers from this sector, detailing the horrible experiences they have had to face because of their occupations.

This is a sector characterised by the total lack of any regulations to protect workers and where the employment of children is a given. At the Matuail Sanitary Landfill, for instance, children as young as 10-years-old work alongside adults (often their parents, too) to collect plastic bottles, electronics, intact glass jars, etc.—anything that is reusable and can thus be sold to nearby scrap collection shops. Without any waste segregation system in our country, the children have to sort through mounds of all kinds of garbage (some as tall as five-storey buildings) for hours on end.

The sheer absence of rules and regulations to protect sanitation and waste workers gives employers the chance to get away with exposing workers to toxic waste, potential (and severe) injuries, and even death. PHOTO: STAR

In the process, they come into contact with toxic liquids, broken glass, blades, etc. while not wearing any kind of protective gear such as gloves or gumboots. Most of the time authorities/employers do not provide them with protective gear, and since nobody gives them a briefing on how dangerous their jobs are, it makes them quite indifferent about protective gear when on rare occasions, they are offered. But those who do want to wear protective gear have to resort to using flimsy polythene bags on their feet and hands to protect themselves to a small degree from the toxic waste.

However, some jobs in this sector are inherently dangerous—deadly, even—and even those have to be conducted by waste workers, unprotected and for measly pay. One of the stories from the aforementioned series details the situation of workers such as Riajuddin who have to enter water-logged manholes, sewage water coming up to their necks, to unclog pipes of polythene bags, pieces of glass, metal, wood, etc. bare-handed and with nothing to protect them from the dirty water or toxic gases inside the manholes. Aches, different kinds of pains, fever, and cuts are occupational hazards for workers like Riajuddin. 33-year-old sewer cleaner Rubel recalled the origin of the four-inch-long scar on his left leg. The cut appeared from a brick when he was cleaning a manhole, and "required 15 stitches and a week-long medical treatment" which cost Rubel and his family Tk 10,000. This amount had to be borrowed from friends and relatives (paid back over one year) instead of Rubel's employer taking responsibility. After a brief resolution to never go back to a profession which did not provide him safety or compensation, Rubel had to continue working again in order to provide for his family.

Calling such instances of injuries faced by sanitation and waste workers "occupational hazards" is not only an understatement, but also not factual. The Bangladeshi government issued a circular in 2013 listing 38 processes or activities which are deemed to be hazardous for children. Despite there being around 10,000 waste workers between the two city corporations of our capital, many of whom are minors, working with toxic waste (and sustaining illnesses and injuries on a daily basis) was not deemed to be one of these hazardous jobs. Moreover, working with waste also failed to make the cut in the 18-items-long list of hazardous operations under Section 83 of the Bangladesh Factories Rules 1979.

Besides physical ailments and injuries, even amongst those who belong to the same social strata as themselves, sanitation and waste workers are often shunned based on their profession. From tea stalls to local hospitals, these workers are, at best, told to keep a distance from the rest of the patrons/patients, if they are not refused service point-blank and/or shooed away. It goes without saying how people belonging to lower-middle to upper classes feel about those who work in this sector, but referring back to the very first paragraph might give you an inkling. If not for the thankless job that sanitation and waste workers do, our streets would be overflowing with all kinds of garbage within a day.

The sheer absence of rules and regulations to protect sanitation and waste workers gives employers the chance to get away with exposing workers to toxic waste, potential (and severe) injuries, and even death. On top of this, they are also not provided any form of insurance/risk allowance nor regular access to health services. The DNCC chief waste management officer said in a report to this newspaper that "they had provided masks, gumboots, gloves, aprons, raincoats, soaps and sanitiser to the workers," but because they "cannot work comfortably wearing these [...] [the workers] do not want to wear them". The DSCC's chief waste management officer meanwhile admitted that, though sick workers are provided with financial help from the mayor's fund, there is no insurance in place and that is something that both city corporations are working on.

While the possibility of sanitation and waste workers finally having some security in the form of insurance acts as a thin ray of hope, there needs to be major reform in this industry if the goal is to protect workers. For one, the elimination of children as waste workers needs to be prioritised. If this work is so dangerous for adults that they develop long-term health problems as serious as cancer, one can only imagine how drastic the effects must be on child labourers, especially if they are allowed to stay stuck in employment in this sector. Besides this, not only do workers need to be trained properly and equipped with protective gear, there must be no alternative to these. That is, a worker should not be allowed to be in a landfill or manhole unless they have been trained to ensure their safety and are wearing protective gear provided by the employer. Lastly, it is high time for Bangladesh to start segregating its garbage into organic waste, glass, metals, plastic, etc. For a country that seems to be progressing digitally and is set to graduate from its least-developed country status by 2026, it is woeful how criminally overlooked those who keep our environment clean and liveable are—at the cost of their own health and lives, and in exchange for pay they can barely live on.

Afia Jahin is a member of the editorial team at The Daily Star.

Walking is not pedestrian

DEBRA EFROYMSON

LIFE has changed in so many ways due to Covid-19, this one change may not even have registered for you. But with restrictions on motorised transport, people are walking more than ever. Much of it is by necessity, but sometimes the necessary can also reveal hidden pleasures.

The Merriam-Webster dictionary defines pedestrian as "commonplace, unimaginative." The fact that the same word is also used to denote people travelling on foot does not help our status. And yet I would argue that walking is anything but commonplace and unimaginative.

If you truly wish to explore your city, to get to know its nooks and crannies, it's best to do so on foot. If you wish to have friendly interactions with other urban residents, it's best to do so on foot. Cycling is a great way to travel farther, but walking is ideal for in-depth, close-up exploration.

If you truly wish to explore your city, to get to know its nooks and crannies, it's best to do so on foot. PHOTO: PINTEREST

Walking of course has many other benefits both to the person doing it and to others in the city. Walking is a great form of exercise and is easier on the joints than running. By walking to our destinations, we can combine exercise, travel and recreation. Since walking requires no terminal capacity (that is, parking), it is vastly more space-efficient than travel by car. Pedestrians do not emit toxic fumes, nor do we require vast resources for our construction and disposal. Pedestrians do require fuel, but since people have to eat anyway, and since we require vastly less fuel to grow our food than a car does to travel, we are environmentally-friendly and good for the climate. And of course it's impossible to seriously harm anyone in a purely pedestrian collision.

With all the benefits of walking both to those on foot and to greater society, why do pedestrians get such short shrift both in transport planning and in our common vocabulary? Unfortunately there is little money to be made off of having more people walking. The three-headed monster—cars, fuel, and road-building corporations—profit when travel is considered to mean motorised vehicles and particularly the automobile. The three-headed monster heavily lobbies governments for greater investments in road-based infrastructure, despite all the costs in terms of lost lives (road crashes), congestion, air pollution, and the climate crisis, to name just a few. And of course there is the perception that only the poor walk (or ride bicycles). Who will lobby on behalf of poor pedestrians? Who can get excited about the commonplace and unimaginative?

But perhaps those who are walking more now during the shutdown are noticing how incredibly enjoyable a trip on foot can be, when not dealing with the danger and fumes of motorised traffic. The opportunities for exercise, socialising, and an opportunity to get to know your city better may help raise the profile of the pedestrian.

It helps to remember that people have always walked a lot. Walking is the main source of transport even in Dhaka, whereas cars account for less than 10 percent of trips.

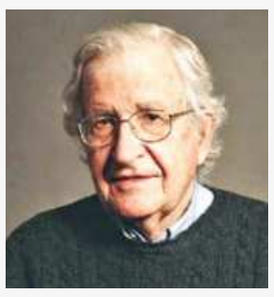
And yet it seems all too easy to forget about pedestrians. Governments tend to regard only trips by motorised travel as worth planning for. Trips by foot, bicycle, and rickshaw are largely ignored or only seen as obstacles for those moving by car. Thus we hear about the "disorderly movement of pedestrians" or their tendency to "throw themselves in front of cars". When we exchange our windshield perspective for a trip on foot, it is no longer the pedestrians who appear to be the problem; then we see all too well the aggression of many drivers and the lack of decent infrastructure or provisions for walking.

It helps to notice that around the world, it is often the wealthiest countries that offer the best environment for walking. Rather than punish those on foot, cities in Eastern and Western Europe as well as Scandinavia—some of the wealthiest cities in the world—reward those on foot. Drivers stop and wait patiently for those on foot to cross the street, without the need for pedestrians to push a button or climb two flights of stairs. Footpaths are wide, and entire streets ban cars, giving people on foot plenty of space to walk, chat, and even play. Walking is celebrated as an important part of a liveable city rather than treated as a desperate mode of travel for those without other options.

While we're all impatient to return to a more "normal" situation post-Covid lockdowns, I do hope that we can remember the joy of walking. I also hope that we can work to improve the walking environment so that commuting by foot becomes something to celebrate rather than dread.

Debra Efroymson is Executive Director of the Institute of Wellbeing in Dhaka, Bangladesh and author of Beyond Apologies, Defining and Achieving an Economics of Wellbeing.

QUOTABLE *Quote*



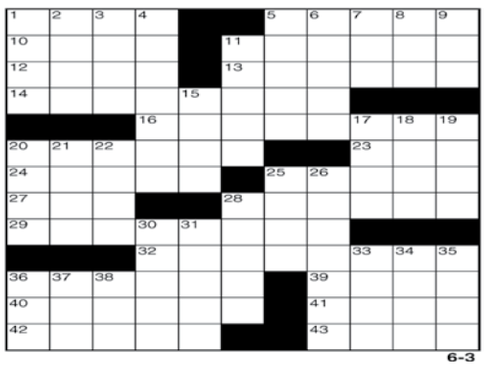
NOAM CHOMSKY
American linguist
(born December 7, 1928)

If we don't believe in freedom of expression for people we despise, we don't believe in it at all.

CROSSWORD BY THOMAS JOSEPH

ACROSS
1 Reach across
5 Social group
10 Old Italian coin
11 Take up residence
12 Smoothie berry
13 Wed in secret
14 Woodshop tool
16 Boxer's weakness
20 Music buys
23 Yale rooter
24 Benefits
25 Scarecrow's desire
27 Sense of self
28 Flora
29 Car buyer's protection
32 Lefty
36 Bath powder
39 Com Belt state
40 Globe features
41 Car part
42 Jury members
43 Wings

DOWN
1 Louver piece
2 Print unit
3 Mecca native
4 Construction tool
5 Fizzy drinks
6 Swears
7 Aug. follower
8 Draw
9 Complete
11 Buttes' kin
15 Shade trees
17 Smart of "Watchmen"
18 Stepped down
19 Takes the prize
20 Third person
21 Theater box
22 Period of growth
25 Raucous sound
26 Eastwood series
28 Purple fruits
30 Film prize
31 Sentence subjects
33 Spot for laps
34 MP's quarry
35 Much of history
36 Summit
37 Poker card
38 Director Spike
39 Corn Belt state



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YESTERDAY'S **ANSWERS**

S	O	A	R				S	T	U	B
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	C	A	T		B	O	R	I	S	
C	O	D		C	A	B	I	N	E	T
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R	A	T	T	Y		T	A	R	O	N
A	L	S	O				R	E	N	D

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BEETLE BAILEY BY MORT WALKER

BABY BLUES BY KIRKMAN & SCOTT