

Another reason to be cautious about reopening schools

Concerns over the threat of dengue to students must be addressed

IT is extremely concerning how dengue cases have been on the rise recently. According to the Directorate General of Health Services (DGHS), in the first week of September alone, over 2,000 dengue cases were recorded in the country, raising the total number of people hospitalised with the disease to 12,434 this year. Amid such a scenario, the authorities need to be extremely cautious, especially as schools are scheduled to reopen next week. All school premises need to be properly and regularly cleaned so that students are not vulnerable to the disease.

As this newspaper reported on Wednesday, schools have been actively trying to keep their premises clean and free of Aedes mosquito larvae, following suggestions from the experts. However, not all schools have been successful in maintaining cleanliness, since they have been closed for around a year and a half. In a couple of schools, benches and other items were found to be piled up, with stagnant water floating around, creating the perfect breeding grounds for Aedes mosquitoes.

Since schools have been closed for so long, it is not surprising that many of them have failed to maintain an acceptable level of cleanliness. However, before reopening, all school authorities must clean and sanitise their institutions properly—they should ensure that piles of garbage are removed, and keep a keen eye to rid the premises of all stagnant water. But even that might not be enough. The local government authorities have to assist schools in their respective areas through extensive fogging and fumigation drives.

In that regard, the DGHS has recently identified 19 hotspots in Dhaka that are most vulnerable to dengue due to widespread presence of Aedes mosquitoes. The city corporation authorities can begin their fumigation drives with a special focus on these areas. They can also coordinate with the authorities of schools in those areas as well as other high-risk places to ensure that the school premises are properly fumigated and ready for reopening. We understand that both the school authorities and state actors have their hands full when it comes to reopening schools due to the threat of Covid-19. But they must also prepare for the threat of dengue. The earlier they make preparations to deal with it, the better and easier it will be later on. For the sake of children's safety, this should be done with great care. We can't be worrying about the threats of Covid-19 and dengue viruses at the same time.

Whose job is it to fix our roads?

Passengers suffer as a 3km stretch of Dhaka-Tangail highway remains waterlogged

IT is disconcerting to know of the terrible condition that a three-kilometre stretch of Dhaka-Tangail highway between Norosinghopur and Shimultala is in, causing distress and disruptions to traffic and pedestrians alike. The road has reportedly been submerged in filthy water from the narrow and overflowing drains for the last three months. Given that it is a part of a major national highway, there are thousands of vehicles plying on it every day. But the constant waterlogging has also created large potholes on the road. So, not only do people need to tread through filthy water, the drivers must also be watchful of the potholes, which only add to their delay and suffering. The situation gets even worse when it rains.

Though workers from the Roads and Highways Department (RHD) periodically "fix" the road using cheap bricks, this is only a temporary and ineffective solution. On the other hand, officials from the RHD itself shift the blame onto locals and nearby factories and businesses for disposing of their waste directly into the area's drains. The department's assistant engineer has specifically blamed the 200 or so factories for the constant waterlogging, as they allegedly discharge water directly into a narrow drain. In addition, some influential people have grabbed the nearby Nayanjuli canal, which has reduced the canal's width from 24 feet to only three or four feet. This prevents drain water from flowing into the river through the canal as it used to be before, prolonging the waterlogging.

If this is the condition of one of our major highways, one need not guess at the horrific state of the "less important" roads, especially during monsoon. We urge the authorities concerned, especially the RHD, to be more active in solving issues such as this, and to not let roads remain practically unusable for so long. Commuters already have to spend hours stuck in traffic every day. If the roads which they use are left in such dilapidated state, it is simply rubbing salt into their wounds. The blame shifting among different government agencies only makes it worse.

LETTERS
TO THE EDITOR

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Stop illegal sale of vaccine

The number of people getting infected by the coronavirus in the country remains worrying. Amid such circumstances, the government's ongoing initiative to inoculate people under the mass vaccination programme deserves special appreciation. But, unfortunately, some unscrupulous "businessmen" are hampering the government's vaccination drive by selling vaccines to various private clinics. They need to be stopped immediately. As a conscious citizen, I urge the authorities concerned to take prompt action to resolve this issue.

Md Rasel Sheik, Ghoraghat, Dinajpur

Vaccinating children is a nice gesture but a bad plan

A CLOSER LOOK



TASNEEM TAYEB

As the world races to achieve immunity from Covid-19 with effective vaccination drives, immunisation campaigns are in progress in Bangladesh as well—albeit with some hiccups. We all remember how the government's special mass vaccination campaign—between August 7 and August 12—ended in a disappointing disarray, as a lot of the vaccine seekers were turned away due to shortage of supply.

Despite the limitations and uncertainties in the vaccine supply chain, the government is now contemplating inoculating adolescents aged 12-17 years (it had earlier lowered the bar for vaccination of students to 18). This comes



There are a huge number of older people and persons with comorbidities who have yet to receive a single dose of Covid vaccine.

FILE PHOTO: TDS

as the government is set to reopen schools and colleges in phases starting from next week. Since March 2020, all educational institutions have remained shuttered and been only operating online to tackle the spread of Covid-19.

While the adolescent inoculation plan is still in the pipeline—awaiting recommendation from World Health Organization (WHO) and the country's National Technical Advisory Committee (NTAC) on Covid-19—the plan raises certain questions. First of all, how safe are vaccines for children? Only a handful of countries around the world have opted to or thought of vaccinating children, including the US, the UK and some other European countries. And only the Pfizer-BioNTech vaccine has been recommended by the WHO Strategic Advisory Group of Experts on Immunization to inoculate children as young as 12.

However, in July, the British government

decided against vaccinating most children—except those at higher risk of contracting Covid-19, including those with Down syndrome, immunosuppression, learning disabilities—due to lack of sufficient safety data. The decision was based on advice by the country's Joint Committee on Vaccination and Immunisation. The British government has yet to take a final call with regard to adolescent vaccination, but a decision is expected within days.

As of September 5, 2021, the Reuters Covid-19 Tracker suggests that “Bangladesh has administered at least 27,715,325 doses of Covid vaccines so far. Assuming every person needs two doses, that's enough to have vaccinated about 8.5 percent of the country's population.” With only less than 10 percent of the country's eligible population vaccinated (by Reuters's estimate), how wise it is to start offering vaccine shots to children remains a question.

government should specifically target the urban poor—day labourers, hawkers, low-paid workers, factory workers, construction workers, domestic workers, and others—for immediate vaccination. It is these people who have to brave the threat of Covid-19 every day and go outside of the house to earn their sustenance. Without bringing them under the vaccination coverage, offering vaccine to adolescents seems like a ludicrous idea, to say the least.

A case can even be made about the timing of reopening educational institutions, coming as it does amid the warning of another wave of Covid-19. Public health experts have recently expressed fear that the gross flouting of Covid-19 safety protocols by the masses might unleash a new wave of the disease in the country. This made the headlines in almost all the news outlets; the authorities concerned are also well aware of this concern. Even if the schools can be made to run under strict health protocols

you—it would be a mammoth challenge for them to take the vaccine to the children at the grassroots level as we lack sufficient storage facilities for the Pfizer-BioNTech vaccine, which requires a cold-chain facility for storage.

With the 26 special fridges received from Unicef, the country now has the capacity to store more than 10 million doses of the Pfizer vaccine, but would that be sufficient to cover all 64 districts? And how are the adolescent children going to register for the vaccine, especially those who do not have access to internet facilities? How is the government going to keep track of whom they are vaccinating? These are important questions that need to be assessed and answered before we embark on a vaccination plan for adolescents.

Since the beginning of its mass Covid-19 vaccination programme, Bangladesh has gone through myriad obstacles and about-faces, often as a consequence of a lack of sound planning. From the failure of the Serum Institute of India (SII) to keep its end of the bargain by ensuring constant supply of the Oxford-AstraZeneca vaccine to the country as per agreement, to the recent debacle of the mass vaccination drive in August, which had to be stopped due to the shortage of shots—the fiascos don't seem to end. In the middle of all these struggles, this new adolescent vaccination plan seems impractical, logistically speaking. Also, the government needs to rethink its plan to reopen educational institutions if it's going to take the same laissez-faire attitude to enforcement of health guidelines that it has demonstrated after lifting the lockdowns and reopening the economy.

Any reopening of schools and colleges, and even universities, without strict and sustained enforcement of the health safety protocols will inevitably increase the risk of exposure to the coronavirus for the students. And with all the chaos going on in terms of vaccination supply and delivery, the least the government can do is revisit its Covid-19 immunisation programme to make it more realistic, science-based and ambitious only to the extent necessary, and to cover on a priority basis the already vulnerable adults, rather than enabling the creation of a new vulnerable category: students.

Vaccinating children, as the heading of an analytical report by *The Daily Star* puts it succinctly, is a plan simply “divorced from reality.” We shouldn't jump on the bandwagon simply because some countries, who are far more capable and prepared than us, have decided to do so, and because doing so will most likely mean taking away vaccines from the more deserving ones.

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As of Sept 5, the Reuters Covid-19 Tracker suggests that Bangladesh has administered over 2.77 crore Covid jabs so far. Assuming everyone needs two doses, that's enough to have vaccinated about 8.5 percent of the country's population.”

following reopening—which seems like the best course of action right now—that concern isn't going to go away. What is the government's plan in this regard? Do they even have one?

Another major bottleneck in inoculating children is the availability of the Pfizer vaccine. On September 1, the country received a shipment of one million doses of the Pfizer vaccine under the COVAX arrangement. However, it is not clear when the next batch would arrive and what the quantity would be. With this limited number of doses, how many children does the government plan to inoculate? How would the government do the mapping? What is the adolescent inoculation strategy? Who would get the shots first?

Moreover, even if the government secures sufficient doses of the Pfizer vaccine to inoculate all the adolescents in the country—and that's a big “if”, mind

Who made men owners of the night?



AFIA JAHIN

PEOPLE'S tendency to drag back any individual who attempts to break away from dominant social norms or expectations has existed in all units of society since time immemorial.

We just have a term for it now that rolls off the tongue easily.

The recent social media outrage over moral policing, specifically that of women, came in the aftermath of actor Pori Moni's arrest in early August, in a case filed under the Narcotics Control Act. Before her detention and the subsequent vilification campaign against her, two models, Piyasha and Mou, were also sued and remanded in separate cases under the same act. Various media outlets seemed to be having a field day over the next week or so, treating these women with anything but respect which any individual, even an accused, deserves in the eyes of the law. As prominent rights activist Sultana Kamal said of the law enforcement and media's treatment of Pori Moni: “Misogyny has entered every nook and cranny of the society.”

What was most derogatory were the terms used by a section of the media to refer to these women, one of them being “raater rani” (literally, “queen of the night”; figuratively, take a wild guess). Because what can be worse than allegedly being a woman in possession of foreign liquor in “huge amounts”? Certainly not allegedly abetting the suicide of a college student whom the accused industrialist (and a married one, no less) “kept” as his mistress. Definitely not fleeing the country after being sued for allegedly torturing and opening fire at two top bank officials, and then being audacious enough to challenge the High Court's rejection of their anticipatory bail petition. Even causing the deaths of at least 52 workers in a factory fire, where the building had no emergency staircases—what the citizen probe committee termed a “systematic killing”—will not qualify as bad enough to warrant that kind of wrath from the moral mercenaries of our society.

No, none of that is seemingly as scandalous or dangerous as an adult woman going out at night or participating

in recreational activities, which are only acceptable for men to be a part of. Men need not explain in detail to anyone why they were out late at night. But do so as a woman, and you will be detained and paraded in front of the media by the country's law enforcement, so all can be witness to your “shame.”

But the hypocrisy of the subcontinent's culture in shunning women for things a man can do without objection is nothing new—and it has found a fertile ground in Digital Bangladesh. This makes sense when you consider how challenging women's autonomy is still encouraged and practised in every facet of our society, despite decades of progress in education

outsiders view them as objects of sex and mistreat them as such.

Most women learn to live with these double standards and mould their “characters,” behaviour and ambitions accordingly. Many even internalise such policing and help to keep other women “in check,” themselves acting as tools of patriarchy.

But some others—and they have been rising in numbers in the last couple of generations—fight back in order to defend their rightly owed agency as free human beings and equal citizens of this country. Sometimes we argue, other times we use wit and irony. An example of the latter would be the *Raater Rani* campaign



Issues like factory fire, embezzlement and violence against women do not attract the same outrage with which the netizens expressed their opinion on Pori Moni's character.

PHOTO: ASIFUR RAHMAN

and women's empowerment.

Beginning at a prepubescent age, the girl children of Bangladesh are made to feel like they are solely responsible for how the people around them may perceive their “character.” For some odd reason, the oh-so-precious honour of each family is directly affected by the (mis) behaviour of its female members. From the clothes she wears (or is allowed to wear) to the opinions she can express—everything must meet the approval of not only her elders, but of the neighbours, relatives, teachers, and even strangers. It is a lot of pressure to be put on an eight/nine/twelve-year-old child and to be told that it is, at least in part, their fault if

by youth organisation Meye Network, which snowballed from the arrests of Pori Moni et al, and was inspired by the media circus that had followed. The campaign included women using the organisation's Facebook profile picture frame—simply the term *raater rani* written in Bangla, the text illustrated as the night sky, to be pasted under your photo—and attaching short essays about their own experiences with moral policing.

These women relayed stories of why they, too, were the “queens of the night.” Some were out late for work or study, others for recreational purposes—all equally entitled to be out at any hour of the day or night as free citizens of a

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free country. But many had to face the judgement of relatives and strangers for practising such freedoms. One woman wrote of an incident where she was travelling by a rickshaw at night when a cyclist coming from the opposite direction shot some choice words at her for being out at that hour, and spat at her. Still, she and all the other participants of the campaign declared their pride in donning the badge of *raater rani*. Essentially, if exercising one's right as a citizen to be out at night and to refuse to be questioned about the reasons behind it makes one a *raater rani*, then so be it.

These incidents and protests illustrate the importance of being progressive in our views regarding people and their freedoms—not just in the devices and technology we use. When half the population of our country is told they need to be afraid of the other half, and that their freedom of movement comes with an arbitrary curfew, it is utterly dehumanising. Moral policing is what contributes to rape culture in our society and makes way for victim blaming, no matter what the circumstances are. The narrative of women being somehow lesser beings must change. We must “allow” women to practise their agency and provide support for them to challenge and defeat the nuanced rules of patriarchy which are so deeply embedded in our society. Neither the individual nor the state alone can stop women from being judged against illogical standards of subjective morality. Battling the moral policing of women needs to be a conscious practice at all levels of society.

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