

Reopened schools bring a moment of joy long denied

Authorities now must maintain the same level of vigilance to keep schools open

AFTER 543 days, most schools and colleges finally reopened on Sunday to the delight of students and teachers. On the first day, schools opened amid a festive mood and were buzzing with students who were overjoyed at being able to see their friends after such a long time and get back to in-class learning. Many schools welcomed their students with flowers, chocolates, pens, pencils and so on. Teachers were also seen dressed up and excited. From our vantage point, the first day of schools reopening was a success, albeit with minor hiccups.

The most glaring among those hiccups were the scenes of parents crowding outside of different schools. According to several reports published by this daily, getting students to follow the health guidelines—i.e. maintaining social distancing, wearing masks, washing hands—was relatively easy for the teachers and school authorities. It was the parents who were violating the rules outside of school gates. By gathering outside of the gates in large numbers, many without masks, these parents were not only risking their own health, but that of their children and also the school staff. We are greatly disturbed by their lack of awareness or, if they were aware, their lack of willingness to follow the health guidelines—both equally concerning. If children otherwise preoccupied with the thought and delight of meeting their friends after so long can remain conscious of following guidelines, why can't their guardians?

The performances of the majority of school authorities as well as the government authorities were commendable. And they mostly did an excellent job of preparing the necessary facilities for students to safely return to schools. However, it has to be kept in mind that this is a marathon and not a sprint. And schools have to maintain this level of performance consistently, as any laxity amidst a still-dangerous pandemic could lead to dire consequences.

Unfortunately, not all schools were able to reopen on Sunday. Some 400 schools affected by floods in different parts of the country were forced to remain closed due to waterlogging. Although the school authorities have been attempting to take classes elsewhere, we call on the government to assist them to return to normal school functions at their institutions as early as possible.

What has been obvious on the first day of school reopening is the sheer joy experienced by students at being able to return to their schools, which makes learning fun and that much easier. In order to keep the schools open in the long run, the authorities have to ensure that health guidelines are consistently followed without exception, so that the virus cannot spread there leading to further school closures. This will be a tough task, but one that must be successfully carried out.

Save the environment, and the leather industry too

Shutdown of pollutant Savar tannery complex should not be permanent

WE commend the Ministry of Environment, Forest and Climate Change for its quick move to implement a recent recommendation of a parliamentary committee to shut down the Savar Tannery Industrial Estate (STIE) in Hemayetpur. Though the complex has been in development for nine years and has had Tk 500 crore spent on it, its Central Effluent Treatment Plant (CETP) is still not fully constructed (the completion deadline was 2017). According to a report by this daily, the CETP is currently only able to treat 70 percent of the around 40,000 cubic metres of waste produced by the tanners every day.

The delay in completing CETP construction has caused a number of problems. Besides causing severe harm to the surrounding environment, the complex is unable to acquire the Leather Working Group (LWG) certification which is needed to get better export prices for our leather goods on the international market. Currently, Bangladeshi leather, leather goods and tanned leather goods exporters are having to sell their products for 40 percent below the actual price, as the lack of LWG certification reflects poorly on the compliance practice of a country. Now, it seems the undesirable export situation of the country's leather goods must be forgotten in order to save the Dhaleshwari river from having tonnes of untreated liquid and solid waste dumped into it every day.

While we support the move by the environment ministry to shut down the tannery complex in a bid to save the environment, we also hope that this will not result in a complete cessation of the production of leather goods. If the CETP is constructed fully in the near future and the LWG certification is obtained, it would be ideal to revive the country's multi-billion-dollar leather industry. If that happens, not only can the tanneries operate in a more environment-conscious manner, but the industry will also attract better prices for leather goods thanks to the LWG certification.

There is hope in this regard as the parliamentary body has reassured that the issue of reopening the 130 tanneries of the STIE may be considered in the future if they operate in accordance with the provisions of the law. This is what we would urge the relevant authorities to work towards as well, so that the leather industry of the country does not die an unnecessary and preventable death.

Schools have reopened, but can we stem the tide of child marriage?

More targeted measures necessary to bring girls back to schools



LAILA KHONDKAR

NEWS of child marriage is unfortunately quite common in Bangladesh. But the report about 50 young girls from the same school being married off during the pandemic is

something that hits you especially hard. It happened in Alipur Ideal Secondary Girls' School of the Alipur Union of Satkhira district, according to a national newspaper. School authorities, parents and activists say that child marriage has increased at an alarming rate during the prolonged school closures caused by the Covid-19 pandemic.

There is a lack of data on child marriage since the pandemic began. However, non-governmental organisations have confirmed, based on information gleaned from their field-level operations, that child marriage has indeed increased. According to the "Rapid Analysis of Child Marriage Situation during Covid-19" by Manusher Jonno Foundation, at least 13,886 girls from 84 upazilas of 21 districts were forced into child marriage from April to October last year. The media has been reporting on incidents of child marriage during the pandemic quite regularly.

Child marriage is a serious violation of children's rights and a form of sexual violence. Girls who are forced to marry early have increased health problems and face more domestic violence. Child marriage also means school drop-out and an end to childhood. It's worth noting that Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) target 5.3 aims to eliminate child

the world with the highest levels of child marriage. About 51 percent of women currently aged 20-24 were married while they were still children. I have been privileged to meet many adolescent girls—from the *haors* of Sunamganj to the slums of Khulna—who were determined to continue their education but lived with the constant fear of marriage. I wonder how many of them had to give up on their dreams of education and a decent

shows that families turn to child marriage as a coping strategy to reduce the number of mouths to feed. Concerns regarding joblessness, poverty, food shortages and fear and insecurity among parents due to the pandemic are the reasons for a surge in child marriage in different parts of the world. This is reversing the progress made over the last 25 years.

In Bangladesh, it is estimated that 24.5 million people have become new poor

development to find jobs. Initiatives should be taken to strengthen the child protection system so that communities themselves can protect girls from early marriage. Girls' safety in the communities must be ensured. Also, efforts should be made to bring back married girls to schools. All stakeholders have to listen to girls while taking decisions affecting their lives.

In addition to the proper enforcement



'It is our collective failure that we have not been able to prevent so many child marriages during the pandemic.'

PHOTO: AP

It is crucial that girls are especially supported to return to education. This might involve flexible learning, catch-up courses and accelerated learning opportunities.

marriage by 2030. Each year, globally 12 million girls are married before they turn 18. International organisations project that an additional 10 million girls will marry as children by 2030 due to Covid-induced restrictions, school closures, disruption to child marriage programming, and economic instability.

According to "Ending Child Marriage: A Profile of Progress in Bangladesh" (a report launched by Unicef in October 2020), Bangladesh has the highest prevalence of child marriage in South Asia and ranks among 10 countries in

job if they were forced into marriage.

Poverty, lack of social safety of adolescent girls, natural disasters, and weak enforcement of Child Marriage Restraint Act, 2017 are some of the reasons for child marriage in Bangladesh. Our patriarchal society places disproportionate emphasis on girls' and women's caregiving and reproductive roles. As a result, there is a high level of social acceptance of child marriage. Parents arrange the marriage of their daughters whenever they find a "suitable groom" without thinking how this would affect their education, health and future.

In Bangladesh, incidence of child marriage begins to decline only among those with at least 10 years of schooling, and its prevalence falls below 50 percent among those with at least 12 years of schooling. It is, therefore, extremely important that girls stay at schools. In many places, as the schools were closed for so long, friends and teachers did not know about the forced marriages of victims and could not do anything to prevent them. Union-level committees meant to prevent child marriage were not that active either during the pandemic.

Evidence from a multi-country study in Africa and Asia on the pandemic's impacts on the lives of young people

due to the pandemic. This means that even now, when schools have finally reopened after 543 days, girls, especially in the rural areas, are less likely to return to classrooms because their families cannot pay the fees. This, among other factors, increases their risk of early marriage. Many girls have become the main caregiver for their sick family members or had to look after siblings. They may not return to schools. This happened to girls in West Africa after the Ebola crisis.

Therefore, it is crucial that girls are especially supported to return to education. This might involve flexible learning, catch-up courses and accelerated learning opportunities. Teachers need to check school enrolment lists to identify and follow up with those girls who have not returned to schools. Specific attention should be paid to the unequal distribution of unpaid care and domestic work so that it does not hinder girls' return to schools.

Targeted initiatives should be taken by the government to protect and support the incomes of families with girl children, including social protection interventions such as cash transfers to reduce the risk of child marriage as an economic coping strategy for the families. Adolescent girls should also have opportunities for skills

of the law against child marriage, birth and marriage registration systems should be strengthened. Local administrations must perform their duties effectively to prevent child marriage. Parental awareness of the rights of girls to education, health and protection should be increased. Social norms regarding the acceptance of child marriage have to be addressed so that community members learn to respect the academic and professional aspirations and achievements of girls and women. NGOs and government authorities can work in a collaborative way for a greater impact in this area.

It is our collective failure that we have not been able to prevent so many child marriages during the pandemic. And the danger, even after schools have reopened, is far from over. If we are serious about achieving the national target of ending child marriage by 2041, then we must make this a priority and bring momentum to implementing the plans we have made. The government, parents, teachers, civil society, the media, community members, etc. all must be more committed to ensuring that our girls can grow up to realise their full potential.

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If Accord is doing more harm than good, why are we not speaking up?



NURUL MUKTADIR BAPPY

WHENEVER there is any news on the Accord, we can almost sense the fierce debate between owners and workers about to follow. Yet,

despite being the bridge between the two sides, mid-level executives like me are always left out of such conversations. It is a wonder that our opinions don't seem to matter; even if they do, not many of us are willing to come forward and share them.

There is a common conception that all the good, compliant and green factories in Bangladesh exist because of the Accord. The usual narrative is that, without such a pact, many factories would collapse or catch fire on a regular basis. Although it is somewhat true, the opinion of the managerial people directly involved in implementing the "corrective action plans" wouldn't just vary—it would be the polar opposite.

Hence it almost felt like a triumph when two years ago I read about a conference where the BGMEA's former president Rubana Huq clearly said the conditions being imposed by the Accord were harming the apparel industry. I remember feeling delighted to see that someone was finally protesting publicly!

Among our small and scattered community of executives, it seemed almost too good to be true, given the Accord's extension earlier. It is evident that every factory, having the most skin in the game, is too wary of such one-sided

regulations to support its stay any longer. So, how come none of them criticise its shortcomings openly? And, if the Accord was so unjustified, why did only one factory go to the court (Smart Jeans Ltd in Chattogram), while the rest did not?

The prime reason has to be the reaction (or punishment?) from the brands. As I was reading numerous news on the new Accord formation, I couldn't help but notice that all the responses in opposition

result in factories being tagged as "anti-compliance."

The Accord did a lot of good. It stirred us in ways that we needed decades ago. Still, there were—and most certainly are—so many better and more thoughtful alternatives to achieve the same outcome. Accord is a legally binding agreement between trade unions and brands, but not us. Even its new form, the International Accord on Health and Safety in the

ACCORD
on Fire and Building Safety in Bangladesh

The Accord is a legally binding agreement between brands from around the world and trade unions in Bangladesh.

PHOTO: COLLECTED

were "anonymous."

I recall a piece where Mostafiz Uddin, managing director of Denim Expert Ltd, frankly admitted to being blacklisted by buyers for revealing their names after they didn't pay for orders in the wake of the Covid-19 pandemic. As the founder of Denim Expo as well as one of the most internationally acclaimed faces when it comes to sustainability, Mostafiz is surely not an easy target; yet, his business has taken the heat. Not many of the hundreds of his counterparts can claim to have similar or even remotely close footing in this trade. Since one's entire business falls at risk for objecting to the vile crime of non-payment with no protection whatsoever, criticising the Accord will not only hamper business, but also

Textile and Garment Industry, completely disregards the factories' involvement in policy making. So, if a garment manufacturer fails to comply with its requirements, however impractical or illogical they might be, the brand either cuts business ties with it or faces legal repercussions from the workers' unions. Our country's laws and local jurisdiction have not been taken into account. It is as if the buyers would play the role of a referee in a match where workers and the factory management fight each other.

This "policing" comes with unchecked power that giant brands have already been exerting over supply chains. We are not China, who can simply wipe off a brand (H&M) from its map for nonconformity. In Bangladesh, equal and opposite

reaction doesn't occur. So, unless you have nothing else to lose (like the factory who went to court), the best way to deal with it is to keep quiet.

It's only understandable that questioning the Accord angers the workers' representatives, who got a much needed but long forgotten role to play at the policy-making level through this. We all want safety at workplace, but not with the strings attached with the Accord. My father had joined the garment sector before I was born. I started working in a factory while I was still an undergraduate student. I survived Rana Plaza and its aftermath. As I have seen during my time in this trade, the fundamental issue that stops ensuring safer working environment is the absolute imbalance of power—not a few noncompliant owners at the helm. We must first address that elephant in the room, and establish the buyers' financial involvement in the production process. As for the safety and compliance concerns, international pressure, intense competition among suppliers, and authorities like the RMG Sustainability Council (RSC) will do more than just fine to address those issues.

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