

## Worst time for high commodity prices

*The government should have addressed this situation much better*

OVER the last couple of weeks, prices of almost all daily essentials have shot up in kitchen markets across Bangladesh, causing immense suffering for people with fixed income, who are already struggling due to the economic slowdown caused by the Covid-19 pandemic. According to a report published by this daily yesterday, sugar price has gone up by 11 percent, fine flour price rose by 9-13 percent, onion price by around 50 percent, and egg price by around Tk 10 per dozen—and these are just a few examples.

The rising demand for commodities at a time when supply chains are yet to fully recover from the pandemic is one factor that is leading to the price hikes. Another reason that traders give for charging extra for these essential commodities is their increased prices in the international market. However, according to the president of the Consumers Association of Bangladesh, prices of many of the items have risen much more in the local market than in the international market. This means that traders are just using the excuse of higher prices in the international market to charge people more, he further added.

The government should immediately look into this and punish the errant traders for trying to exploit consumers by violating the government-fixed prices for these items. At the same time, the government should look to stem the ongoing slow depreciation of the taka against the US dollar, which is increasing the import cost of different commodities. According to economists, Bangladesh always remains vulnerable to import-induced inflation because of its reliance on external markets for key commodities. As a result, the only way for Bangladesh to get out of this vicious cycle—which also includes depending on other countries to make sound financial decisions, which often backfires—is to develop its own supply chains for certain essential commodities. In fact, this is something that should have already been done by now, or at least attempted.

Nevertheless, as an immediate remedy, the government should look to sell some of these essential commodities in the open market to bring down their prices. It should also provide some essential commodities from its own stock to people who are struggling in the form of government aid—or subsidise their costs—and take urgent steps to ensure compliance with its price rates in the retail market. For the long run, the government should formulate its macroeconomic policies more carefully, as some analysts have predicted that there will be substantial inflationary pressure coming from the ongoing global economic instability, as the world continues to try and recover from the Covid-19 pandemic.

## What will happen to the teachers who have lost their jobs?

*Many struggling kindergarten schools didn't receive any support during the pandemic*

THE 543-day-long school closure in Bangladesh—one of the longest in the world—has caused worries about heavy learning losses, and raised concerns over the lack of teachers to help students with recovery. Even before the Covid-19 pandemic, experts had warned that the absence of a well-established, pre-service teacher education programme was putting Bangladeshi teachers at a disadvantage and having repercussions on the entire education system. The subdued observation of World Teachers' Day yesterday revealed that the pandemic has made the situation far worse, and thousands of teachers across the country—especially from kindergarten schools—will likely never be able to return to their students.

According to a report in this daily, the education disruption in the country forced many kindergartens to shut their doors permanently. The kindergarten teachers' associations estimate that around 40 to 50 percent of teachers have lost their jobs, and nearly 20,000 kindergartens are unlikely to open up again. There are also reports of kindergartens that opened up but were forced to close down again, as most of their students have either shifted to government primary schools or dropped out.

Why did these schools not receive any financial assistance during the pandemic? Certain steps, such as soft loans for owners or the waiver of utility bills, could easily have been taken by the authorities. It is regrettable to see teachers being forced to give up their professions to toil in farms, open vegetable/tea stalls, and even pull rickshaws to make ends meet after not receiving their salaries for months on end. Especially now, when the pandemic has revealed the crucial role that teachers must play to support students in this "new normal," it is difficult to fathom that the Directorate of Primary Education still has no plans to support these teachers.

We have no idea what impact this reduction in the teaching workforce will have on our youngest students. However, it is clear that the government needs a strategy to ensure that teachers don't continue to haemorrhage from an already bruised education system. After all, the well-being of students is contingent on the well-being of teachers, and no learning recovery plan will succeed without taking care of the needs of teachers. It's high time the government thought critically and creatively about our education workforce. This year's theme for World Teachers' Day was: "Teachers at the heart of education recovery." We need to take this theme to heart as well, and build an education system where teachers are valued and given the resources they need to carry out their responsibilities efficiently.

# Time to make mental well-being a priority

*We need to normalise mental health issues, just like the physical ones*



LAILA KHONDKAR

**F**AIROOZ Faizah Beether, a fourth-year student of Khulna University, recently received the 2021 Goalkeepers Global Goals Changemaker Award from the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation. Fairooz is one of the co-founders of Moner School, a youth-led platform that is working on increasing mental health awareness. The team consists of para-counsellors who offer critical primary counselling to young people, and refer them to expert mental health professionals. This initiative is very encouraging, especially when mental health still remains a taboo subject in Bangladesh.

According to the World Health Organization (WHO), "mental health is a state of well-being in which an individual realises his or her own abilities, can cope with the normal stresses of life, can work productively and is able to make a contribution to his or her community." Myriad social, psychological, and biological factors determine the level of a person's mental well-being at any point of time.

On average, around 10,000 people die by suicide in Bangladesh every year, says the Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics (BBS). According to a 2018 survey on mental health jointly conducted by the government and the National Institute of Mental Health, the overall prevalence of mental disorders among the population 18 years and above is 18.7 percent.

Suicide is the second leading cause of death globally among 15- to 29-year-olds, while depression is one of the leading causes of disability, according to WHO. Mental health has been included in the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), which is an acknowledgement of the importance of mental health in achieving global development. The Covid-19 pandemic has led to an increased understanding of mental health issues in different parts of the world.

Mental health challenges are still a big problem in Bangladesh due to a lack of awareness as well as a shortage of trained professionals. There are only 270 psychiatrists and roughly 500 psychologists for the entire population of over 160 million. Of them, the majority are based in urban areas. The allocation

for the mental health sector in the government's budget is less than one percent.

The stigma attached to mental health continues to be a problem in Bangladesh, and there are many misconceptions surrounding this issue. Some people—especially in rural areas—turn to traditional healers for cure. These practices sometimes lead to human rights violations and may have fatal consequences. In our society, in both rural and urban settings, the majority of people are not aware that anyone can suffer from mental health problems, and when that happens, we need to seek support as we do when we face physical health challenges. People are generally insensitive regarding mental health issues,

was trying to protect her daughter from getting stigmatised in society. I am aware of professionals who don't mention "depression" as a cause for their sick leave, as they fear discrimination by their colleagues. Due to the judgemental and discriminatory attitudes of society, many mental health problems remain undiagnosed or are being diagnosed very late—and the delay in treatment makes it more difficult. Most mental health issues could be treated with effective interventions. A well-respected psychiatrist in the country once told me, "I feel sad that many people in Bangladesh unnecessarily suffer from some mental health issues that are chronic manageable conditions."

Bangladesh passed the Mental Health



**We need to break the taboo on mental health issues in Bangladesh.**

PHOTO: COLLECTED

which is reflected in the jokes they make. Sometimes an entire family is ostracised and isolated due to one of their members suffering a mental health challenge. This is a major reason why most people in our society tend to hide their mental issues and even remain in denial about their conditions, which only aggravates their sufferings.

For many, anyone with a mental health challenge is "mad." They think there must be something "wrong" with the person or they are to be blamed for what has happened to them. This attitude is a major hindrance towards normalising mental health, and for the survivors to disclose their states. "I told my daughter not to tell anyone that we are taking her to counselling," said a mother of a 15-year-old girl. The mother

Act in 2018, replacing a 106-year-old piece of legislation. The act aims to protect the property rights of those suffering from mental illnesses, and includes provisions for mental health services. While the act faces some criticism, increased attention on mental health through legislative action is a step in the right direction. Bangladesh finalised its National Mental Health Strategic Plan in 2020 and has started implementing it. But there is still a long way to go to ensure mental health support to all those who need it.

Mental health is fundamental to our collective and individual abilities to think, interact with each other, earn a living, and celebrate life. The awareness and protection of mental health should be regarded as a vital concern for individuals, communities, and societies. We must

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prioritise maintaining sound mental health if we are to remain truly healthy and realise our potential to the fullest.

The government should make mental healthcare a part of its primary healthcare system at district and upazila levels. Training should be provided to the existing medical professionals and others on mental healthcare to meet the shortage in human resources. There is a need for increased investment in mental health awareness, and for increasing access to quality mental healthcare and effective treatment options.

Having a mental health problem is not anyone's fault or failure. If there is a change in someone's behaviour or lifestyle, and they seem to be unable to function properly in their day-to-day life, then professional support must be sought for proper diagnosis and support. Nobody should feel ashamed of having mental health issues and suffer in silence.

"I can treat my bipolar mood disorder, but I cannot treat your attitudes towards me"—this is a statement from a campaign on mental health in Australia. In addition to appropriate medication (if required) and counselling, it is important to have a healthy lifestyle as well as a supportive network of family and friends to maintain a functional life while facing a mental health problem. It takes a huge amount of courage, determination, and patience to manage the condition. Let us have empathy and understanding as family members, friends, colleagues, and neighbours, and support the people who are brave enough to fight mental health issues. Let's not make our attitude another challenge for them.

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## How to make the most out of Covid-19 vaccination

MOHAMMAD TARIQUR RAHMAN and MUHAMMAD MANJURUL KARIM

**V**ACCINATION against Covid-19 has been at the centre of most discussions related to the pandemic management across the world. Many countries have enforced certain regulations, including restrictions on movement within their territories as well as beyond their borders without completing vaccination. There have been sporadic but strong protests against these standard operating procedures (SOPs)—with claims that these measures enforced social division rather than

General Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus has cautioned.

While everyone wants this pandemic to end, and vaccination is widely considered to be the most practical measure to reach that goal, the global inequity in vaccine distribution—or vaccine apartheid, if you will—is still the reality on the ground. The *British Medical Journal (BMJ)*, in its editorial published on August 16, 2021, summarised the problem this way, "Some vaccine-rich countries are destroying excess, unused doses. And some have imposed export bans and restrictions to protect their stockpiles. Ironically, vaccine companies prevent poorer countries from



**The Covid-19 vaccines should be given to those who need it the most first.**

FILE PHOTO: REUTERS

social distancing—in several developed countries. Like it or not, without taking all the vaccine shots, one's life could come to a standstill, unless one wants to stay isolated.

However, what makes Covid-19 vaccination "complete" still remains a mystery. Is it a regimen of two or three doses, or yearly shots? Scientists, vaccine producers, and the World Health Organization (WHO) seem to differ in their opinions in this regard. The emergence of the deadly SARS-CoV-2 variants could be a consequence of a lack of "mass" vaccination, WHO Director

insisting on similar measures."

Nonetheless, the major vaccine producers are counting their revenues in billions, while the 50 least wealthy nations, home to 20 percent of the world's population, have received just two percent of all vaccine doses—which the *BMJ* has termed "a crime against humanity." The hard reality, which seems to be not fully appreciated as yet, is that the occurrence of a single case of Covid-19 in any part of the world means the entire world is at risk. The quicker the Western world understands this, the better.

Meanwhile, even the vaccine-rich countries have not made getting the Covid-19 vaccine obligatory. To make it legally obligatory, the first obstacle would be the guarantee of safety—or lack thereof. The vaccine-producing companies would not want to compensate anyone who might suffer for the vaccine's side-effects, no matter how insignificant the number of the affected vaccine recipients. In most countries, vaccination is optional with certain conditions. It is by law a choice whether someone wants to be vaccinated. At the same time, informed written consent is obtained before the vaccine doses are administered—mostly to provide immunity to the vaccine producers for any possible harmful after-effects.

Against this global backdrop, the very first question that may come to our minds is: Should we make Covid-19 vaccination obligatory in Bangladesh? If so, for whom? Should it be based on age, or should it be based on the nature of one's job or profession?

In a recent round-table discussion organised by the Bangladesh Society of Microbiologists, Dr Saif Ullah Munshi, professor at the Department of Virology in Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujib Medical University (BSMMU), explained how an infection with coronavirus boosts the human immune system. He also explained how the risk of re-infection remains similar for both those who develop natural immunity after recovering an infection and those who are vaccinated. Therefore, he suggested prioritising vaccination for those who have not been infected—i.e. have not developed natural immunity—rather than vaccinating everyone, including those who have already developed immunity.

The notion was supported by other panellists in the discussion, including Dr Nazrul Islam, former vice-chancellor of BSMMU; Dr Mahmuda Yasmin, professor at the Department of Microbiology in Dhaka University; Dr AM Zakir Hossain, former director of Primary Health Care at the Directorate General of Health Services (DGHS); and Dr Be-Nazir Ahmed, former director of Disease Control at the DGHS.

To find and scrutinise the individuals who require vaccination, a test to detect the presence of the antibody against the SARS-CoV-2 is more useful than the one that would detect its presence. The

antibody test will not only identify the part of the population who need the vaccine more urgently, but will also reveal what percentage of the general population have acquired natural immunity against the virus. The measurement of the level of immunity in an individual's sample is, therefore, a key performance indicator (KPI) for the vaccination programme.

An appropriate tool to detect the antibody is, of course, essential and is technically similar to what is used to detect the presence of the virus itself.

Given this scientific rationale, it is not necessary to impose vaccines directly or indirectly on everyone. Rather, the authorities concerned could give the vaccine to those who have not developed any form of immunity against the virus.

On the same note, it can be safely recommended that there is no need to wait until all university-going students get the vaccine before the universities physically resume academic activities. Rather, it might be more practical to see who have yet to develop immunity through natural infection, and plan to vaccinate them on a priority basis. The same may be applied to schoolteachers who are now physically attending to their jobs.

However, the plan for school-going children and adolescents presents two added issues to consider: First, who will sign the informed consent on behalf of them, and how; and second, the actual safety records of childhood vaccination. Before implementing any policy to vaccinate school children, those two issues must be thoroughly looked into, by getting healthcare professionals and other stakeholders involved in the process. According to the WHO, more evidence is needed on the use of Covid-19 vaccines in children to be able to make general recommendations on vaccinating children against the pandemic.

The Covid-19 vaccination can be more effective if it is administered to those who need it the most and those who are least likely to manifest any lethal side-effects. Policymakers in our country as well as in the world may want to work hand-in-hand to make the vaccination process more effective to get rid of the pandemic.

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