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# More efforts needed to stop child marriage

### *Why were our girls not protected from becoming child brides during the pandemic?*

THE International Day of the Girl Child, observed around the world yesterday, brought with it some sobering statistics: almost 2.5 million child marriages took place across the world during the Covid-19 pandemic, of which at least 11,000 occurred in Bangladesh, according to data gathered by *The Daily Star* from different districts. In March this year, Unicef warned that school closure, economic stress, service disruptions, and parental deaths were putting the most vulnerable girls at increased risks of child marriage. That this warning was particularly relevant for Bangladesh was confirmed once schools reopened last month, and teachers started to notice how many girls did not return to their classrooms.

Bangladesh already had the fourth highest prevalence of child marriage in the world prior to the pandemic, and research has shown a deep-rooted link between poverty and child marriage. In this context—and given that Covid-19 has, according to various reports, created somewhere between 16 and 24 million new poor in the country—it is surprising that the government was caught unawares by this eventuality of pandemic-induced poverty leading to increased child labour and child marriage in struggling households.

In a report published by this daily, school authorities shared how no guidelines were given from the education authorities regarding the monitoring of students during school closure, and that the long gap in teacher-student communications meant that most were not even aware that their students had been married off. Why did the education authorities fail to give teachers any sort of directives in this regard over the past 1.5 years? Even now, there is no specific data from the authorities on the impact of school closure on the rates of child marriage and school dropouts.

Research suggests that children who are married off with low levels of education are at higher risk of domestic and/or sexual violence, which can have lasting psychological implications. Thus, the government must waste no time in taking aggressive measures that will bring these child brides back to school. At the same time, the authorities must acknowledge their failure in preventing child marriage during the pandemic, and come up with proper monitoring mechanisms to ensure that the Child Marriage Restraint Act is actually enforced. This is currently not happening since, despite it being illegal to solemnise or conduct a child marriage, these events are still occurring at *kazi* offices, and notary publics are abetting them by providing fake birth certificates.

This situation is only aggravated by the "special provision" in the law that allows for certain child marriages to occur. Given the severe physical and mental health risks that child brides face, and how this scourge has worsened even further during the pandemic, the government must demonstrate its commitment to rooting out child marriage, once and for all, and rid the Child Marriage Restraint Act of this contemptible loophole.

# Soaring food prices worrisome

### *Consumers are stuck between a rock and a hard place*

THE skyrocketing food prices continue to make the headlines in Bangladesh, exposing the government's failure to put in place an effective mechanism to check the prices of essential goods in the kitchen markets. Week after week, this daily has reported how prices of broiler chicken, edible oil, green chilli, etc have continued to soar, putting immense pressure on low- and fixed-income groups. Even the price of rice—for which the government reduced import duty from 62 percent to 25 percent to keep the price stable—has risen over the past month.

Despite the commerce ministry saying that onion production reached 2.7 million tonnes this year, against an annual demand of 2.8 million tonnes, the prices of onion rose by Tk 30-35 in about a week. As the government has clearly failed to make traders stick to the set price rate for many essential commodities, consumers have had to cut down on their consumption—their daily protein intake, in particular. Meanwhile, market analysts have raised questions about the authenticity of traders' claims for raising prices. Traders have been saying that they have been continually forced to raise prices due to higher prices of commodities internationally. However, as many experts have pointed out, commodity prices in our kitchen markets have spiked substantially more, compared to the international prices.

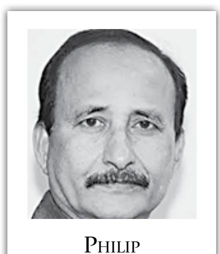
Therefore, it is essential for the government to look into the matter, and punish errant traders and syndicates for trying to exploit consumers at a time when a vast number of people are struggling economically due to various pandemic-related issues.

At the same time, it is important to point out that commodity prices have been on the rise for a month now; the recent price hikes have only added to people's woes. The question is: What has the government been doing all this time? Its inaction or failure to control commodity prices only illustrates its apathy to the plight of people.

While the government must take every step necessary to bring commodity prices down to affordable levels, it must also come up with better and more timely strategies of market intervention, as well as put in place effective and sustainable oversight mechanisms to keep the market stable in the long run. It is unacceptable that consumers have to pay for the government's failure every few months, when this is one of the most urgent issues affecting the quality of people's lives.

# Will the tea workers get the wages they deserve?

### *The minimum wage board for tea workers has been hijacked by the owners*



PHILIP GAIN

AN unthinkable and deplorable situation has risen out of the rigid position taken by the Minimum Wage Board (MWB) that was formed to fix the minimum wage for the hapless tea workers of Bangladesh. After much haggling, the wage board sent its final recommendation on the minimum wage structure for the tea workers to the Ministry of Labour and Employment. Severely disturbed at the negotiation table of the wage board, Rambhajan Kairi, who represents around 138,000 tea workers from 158 tea gardens in Sylhet and Chattogram divisions, abstained from approving and signing the recommendation. He also did not join the last meeting of the wage board, held just before it sent its recommendation to the labour ministry at the end of June this year.

**The wage structure announced by the Minimum Wage Board deprives the tea workers of Bangladesh of what they deserve.**

PHOTO: RONALD HALDER

The labour ministry, apparently dissatisfied, sent the recommendation back to the wage board, asking it to reconsider the wages of the tea workers who currently get ridiculously low daily cash pay of Tk 117, Tk 118, and Tk 120. The wages of monthly paid tea workers are also similarly low. The ministry's move brought a ray of hope for the tea workers. The wage board, set up by the government in October 2019 to give a pragmatic consideration while fixing the tea workers' wages, kept the same wages that they currently get. The current wages had been fixed for 2019 and 2020 through an agreement between the Bangladesh Tea Association (BTA), which represents the tea garden owners, and Bangladesh Cha Sramik Union (BCSU), the tea workers' union. The tea workers were surprised and shocked to see that the wage board had not changed their wages. What is more, it scrapped the traditions (*dastur*) in the tea gardens, showed little respect to the labour law, curtailed tea workers' benefits, and remained blind to the minimum wages that the government has fixed for other industries.

We haven't seen the communications from the labour ministry, but it is clear that the ministry was not satisfied with the wage board's recommendation, and wanted it reconsidered to do some justice to the tea workers.

However, the meeting that the wage board convened on October 4 to discuss and reconsider the recommendation in light of the ministry directive was allegedly spoiled. "The owners' representative questioned the validity of the meeting, on the grounds that the directive and advice of the labour ministry had not come with its letter, which came on the 44th day after the receipt of the final recommendation. They said the directive came after 45 days, and therefore were void," said Kairi, representative of the tea workers. The wage board chairman himself reportedly took the owners' representative's side.

Section 140 of the Labour Act, however, clearly states that the government, represented by the labour ministry, can send back recommendations made by the minimum wage board for reconsideration within 45 days of its receipt with or without comment and information. Giving comments or additional information is not mandatory.

The chairman and four other members of the Minimum Wage Board reportedly decided not to have any further discussion and to send the same recommendation back to the labour ministry. The October 4 meeting, thus, wound up with a thumb extended downward.

This is a ridiculous development when compared with the minimum wages fixed for workers in other industries. Take the construction and wood sector, for example, where workers are placed in six grades and their wages are calculated on monthly and daily bases. The latest gazette, published on August 16, 2021, has announced their wages. In Grade 6, the lowest-paid among the workers in the construction and wood sector, *jogali*s (helpers) and labourers will now get a daily wage of Tk 620 in rural areas and Tk 680 in urban areas. The daily wages in Grade 5, for assistant masons and other assistant workers (in rod, wood, electricity, paint and polish), will be Tk 710 in rural areas and Tk 770 in urban areas. Masons, carpenters, electricians, assistant mosaic mechanics, assistant tile mechanics, all belonging to Grade 3, will get a daily wage of Tk 870 in rural areas and Tk 940 in the urban areas. The highest paid workers in this sector (in Grade 1)—mosaic and tile mechanics—will get Tk 1,020 in the rural areas and Tk 1,105 in urban areas.

Why, then, are the tea workers, who work harder in the fields and factories, getting such miserable wages? If we recalculate the wages with the subsidies for ration added to the cash pay, a tea worker gets less than Tk 200 a day. As far as we understand, the owners' representative has tried to convince the wage board that it pays a daily wage of Tk 403 to a tea worker. The chairman of the wage board, a senior district judge, must be aware that the owners have monetised the houses given to workers, equipment required for plucking tea leaves, overtime pay, owners' contribution to the provident fund, medical expense, pension, education cost of the children of tea workers, labour welfare programmes, and even the incomes of the tea workers generated from growing vegetables, fruits and raising cattle on the land leased from the government for tea production, while calculating the wages. Section 2 (45) of the labour law does not allow the employers to monetise these and to add them to the wages.

If the wage board had any respect for the labour ministry's advice communicated on September 13 and afterwards, it should have further investigated the grievances of the tea workers and consulted all parties—including economists—to reconsider its recommendation. Section 140 (3) of the labour law states that if the wage board thinks there is no need to amend or change the recommendation, it can inform the government explaining the reasons why. However, the government—more specifically the labour ministry, in this case—has the power to take legal measures to make sure the workers get justice in getting fair wages.

Section 141 of the labour law mentions factors for the wage board to consider at the time of fixing new wage structure for any industry. These are cost of living, standard of living, production cost, price of products, business capability, inflation, type of work, risk and standard, economic and social conditions of the country and of the locality concerned, and other relevant factors.

Had the wage board been mindful of these factors, and considered the wages that the tea workers get in India, Sri Lanka, Kenya, and other countries, it could not have blindly supported the owners and recommended a wage structure that severely infringes the country's constitution and the labour law. Needless to say, the wage board has shown disdain for a largely non-Bangalee and non-Muslim working community, whom many compare with modern-day slaves or a captive labour force.

"If we think of living expenses in the Sylhet region, it is Tk 7,750 for a single adult, Tk 14,500 for a four-member family, and Tk 16,800 for a family with more than four members," said Dr Binayak Sen, director general of Bangladesh Institute of Development Studies (BIDS), during a recent dialogue on tea workers' wages.

"What has been happening with the tea workers is a matter of great injustice," said Dr Hossain Zillur Rahman, former caretaker government adviser and the executive chairman of the Power and Participation Research Centre (PPRC). "The current wages have to be increased because of inflation and other factors. We hope the Minimum Wage Board will increase wages logically."

Despite all the strong arguments shared by different quarters, including the tea workers' union, the owners' side remains rigid about their position to not increase wages at all. With the workers' representative technically excluded, the wage board has blindly taken the owners' side. We can safely say that the owners have hijacked the wage board, to safeguard their profits. This is not fair. The immediate role of the government is to see that justice is done in giving fair wages to the tea workers.

Philip Gain is a researcher and director at the Society for Environment and Human Development (SEHD).

# *Looking beyond LDC: What awaits our RMG sector?*

### *Five ideas to look into for a future-proof apparel industry*

RMG NOTES

MOSTAFIZ UDDIN

THE United Nations Conference on Trade and Development (UNCTAD) has released a new report which looks at how the economies of the least developed countries (LDCs) have progressed during the past 50 years. There is good news for Bangladesh: our country is ranked as one of only seven LDCs that are in the "catching up" category, as defined by the UN.

What does this mean? Well, the report grouped the LDCs into three categories: "falling behind," "muddling through," and "catching up." The countries that are in the "catching up" category are defined as such because their growth rate per capita has exceeded the world's weighted average by more than one percent over the past 50 years.

To be in this category is impressive for Bangladesh. Our annual GDP growth has consistently outpaced many major economies in the last few decades, thanks in large part to the success of the ready-made garment (RMG) sector—our largest export sector.

But now, more than ever, is the time to kick on. There will come a time when we no longer have some of the preferential trading terms that we have been given because of the LDC status. We will need to stand on our own two feet, and to do that our largest export industry and the key driver of our GDP growth needs to evolve. But how? Five ideas come to mind.

The first is to begin the gradual shift to higher-value apparel products. A key feature of textile-producing countries is that they begin with low-value clothing, including basic staple items, before moving to making more sophisticated apparel products with higher values. We should seek to become a source of choice for high-value and luxury brands. Leading US luxury brand Ralph Lauren and Disney are already sourcing from Bangladesh; there is no reason why many more should not open and/or extend their sourcing operations in Bangladesh.

To this end, it was also good to see the president of the Bangladesh Garment Manufacturers and Exporters Association (BGMEA), Faruque Hassan, recently met with major US fashion retailer VF Corporation to discuss matters related to the expansion of the retailer's business in Bangladesh, and how the relationship with this renowned apparel brand can be developed further.

The second idea that I believe we need to look into is pushing more for the use of man-made fibres (MMFs)—including viscose and synthetic fibres such as polyester and nylon. There has been a huge growth in demand for MMFs in the global fashion industry in recent years, and these can be used on their own or in conjunction with cotton.

There is a strong argument for nudging RMG manufacturers towards MMFs—for instance, by financially incentivising them to shift towards their usage. One option, which has already been discussed, is for policymakers to introduce an incentive on export receipts from MMF garments to encourage investment in non-cotton garment production and export. I would firmly support such a move.

The third point I feel we need to address is to encourage more inward investment into our RMG sector. In fact, there is evidence that China views textiles as the "sunset industry" at present, and is looking at other high-end sectors to take their place. At the same time, many Chinese investors are now putting their money into other textile sourcing hubs. These investors are cash-rich as China has been generating a huge trading surplus for years. They have funds to invest, so why not in Bangladesh? Joint ventures between Chinese and Bangladeshi entrepreneurs are another opportunity we should consider. Aside from bringing in investment, China's major textile owners can also offer expertise in different types of textile production, including technical textiles, for different uses—e.g. outdoor clothing.

The fourth step should be for Bangladesh to become an early adopter of clothing recycling. Our biggest customer, H&M, has a mission to only use recycled or other sustainably sourced materials by 2030. This goal is just over nine years away. H&M and other retailers that have set similar targets will only achieve these goals via huge investment in recycling infrastructure in apparel supply chains. Bangladesh needs to take a lead in this area to meet the future requirements of the industry. This will include major tie-ups with recycling technology providing companies and the development of recycling infrastructure within Bangladesh, such as clothing collection, sorting, and recycling facilities.

There is much to do in this area, and we need to start now if we want to become a global leader in this arena—which surely must be the goal.

Finally, I believe it is vital that we get the messaging right. Concerted efforts are needed to build bridges with the media and to put out the right messages about the RMG industry in Bangladesh. This includes correcting misconceptions and mistruths about our RMG industry that have been implanted in the Westerners' minds over many years and are proving difficult to dislodge. We still see many stories in the foreign press about the Bangladeshi RMG industry which simply do not reflect the reality on the ground. For too long we have been passive by-standers amid a tide of unfair negative publicity for Bangladeshi garment manufacturers. As we move beyond the LDC status, we will need to "control" the message about our remarkable RMG industry and, in doing so, truly take our destiny in our own hands.

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