

# The need to improve our worker's compensation system

AN OPEN DIALOGUE



ABDULLAH SHIBLI

**M**Y fellow columnist, Shuprova Tasneem, was recently lamenting the lack of fair wages and workplace safety in Bangladesh. In an op-ed in *The Daily Star*, she ruefully asked, "Why is the dream for fair wages and work safety still so distant?" (October 20,

2021). It is clear that while we, as journalists, have been crying hoarse over the slow progress in these critical areas of the workplace environment, nobody in the government or administration is apparently paying much attention.

After I read her essay and went over my own notes, I discovered that since January 2005, when a fire at a garment factory outside Dhaka killed 22 people and injured more than 50, much has been written in the popular media about industrial accidents, low wages, risks of injuries, and a number of other topics of vital interest to our workers.

Another concern that has recently received some press coverage is the need to compensate for deaths and loss of jobs due to the negligence of factory owners and motor vehicle operators. The High Court in September stepped in and issued a rule over the formation of a financial assistance fund, and a board of trustees to compensate road accident victims or their families. The court asked the concerned authorities to show cause within four weeks as to why they ought not to be directed to form the fund and appoint the trustees immediately, as per sections 53 and 54 of the Road Transport Act 2018.

In the past, civil rights activists and transport system experts have urged the government to ensure that victims of road accidents are adequately compensated by insurance companies or negligent parties. By and large,

whether it is because of road accidents, poorly built factories, bad management practices, or faulty products, countless helpless people are hurt or killed every day, and all these are preventable to a certain degree.

Occupational safety and health practices are somewhat lax in developing countries. Across the globe, we hear about death and injuries at the workplace. As for Bangladesh, our reputation as a trusted source for garments, plastics products and a myriad of other consumer goods is taking a hit because of various factors that make us vulnerable.



Firefighters work at the scene of a fire that broke out at Hashem Foods Ltd in Rugganj of Narayanganj district, Bangladesh, on July 9.

According to the Associated Press, Bangladesh "has a tragic history of industrial disasters, including factories catching fire with the workers locked inside. Continuing corruption and lax enforcement have resulted in many deaths over the years."

Economic growth is like a two-edged sword. Bangladesh is making good progress

towards achieving middle-income status next decade, but rapid growth brings with it many unanticipated risks, including injuries and death, health damages, and other human costs. Since the Rana Plaza collapse in 2013, world attention has been directed to improving working conditions, and things have changed significantly. However, hardly a month goes by without another incident of mass casualties due to fire, building collapse, serious injuries at work, or other triggers for enhanced mortality and morbidity (i.e., sickness).

The most recent serious industrial accident

standstill.

Workers are frequently hurt and maimed, or in the worst-case, die due to negligence of the owners who are driven by the profit motive. However, the tragedy is compounded further when the victims are either not compensated adequately or left to fend for themselves to defray the cost of medical care. Exactly 12 years ago, I brought up these issues in this newspaper and spoke out strongly for a system that would allow workers to be compensated for their losses. In an op-ed titled, "How much is a human life worth?" I argued that human life should be valued in decision-making since the matter is of "enormous importance in the context of environmental and medical policy" (*The Daily Star*, October 24, 2009).

Many factors account for the prevalence of occupational hazards, including lack of a strict regulatory framework, poor enforcement, shortage of inspectors, and absence of oversight. During his recent visit to Boston, where I met him, the President of the Federation of Bangladesh Chambers of Commerce and Industries (FBCCI) pointed out that garment factories often work with low profit margins that do not allow for the owners to comply with all the rules and regulations in the books.

Another matter that demands urgent attention is the frequent delays in providing compensation to the victims of accidents. Taqbir Huda, who is a coordinator of Justice For All Now (JANO, Bangladesh) wrote that the investigation into the Hashem Foods factory fire accident revealed that the deaths were determined to be "murder caused by negligence", but the victims were given a measly Tk 2 lakh for each family. In an article titled, "Three months after the Hashem factory fire, has there been any 'justice'?" Huda strongly condemns the ploy used by the Sajeeb Group, the owner of the factory, to extract a signed declaration from the victims' families that prohibits the latter from suing the former in a criminal case (*The Daily Star*, October 8, 2021).

While I am writing about compensation and

the value of human life, I would like to raise the awareness of the readers by showcasing the Boeing case. A total of 346 people lost their lives in two air disasters due to Boeing Company's negligence in manufacturing and training for its 737 MAX aircraft. A Lion Air 737 jet crashed off the coast of Indonesia on October 28, 2018. Another 737 belonging to Ethiopian Airlines crashed shortly after take-off from Addis Ababa on March 19, 2019.

In both instances, the US government and the investigative arms of the respective airlines pinned the blame on Boeing and its faulty flight-control system known as MCAS. In terms of offering compensation to the victims of the two air disasters, Boeing has accepted responsibility and had been in talks for almost three years with all parties, particularly the victims' families, over the amount of money. An interesting aspect of this case is that Boeing is facing additional lawsuits for the Ethiopian case since lawyers contend that the aircraft manufacturer knew right after the Lion Air 2018 crash that the malfunctioning MCAS system was the cause of the crash. The company is not only facing charges for the lax oversight of the design, production, and certification of the MAX, but also its failure to ground the aircraft after the first crash.

Boeing originally offered to pay USD 100 million to the victims' families which works out to be less than USD 300,000 per victim. That would have been the end of the story if not for the efforts of families of victims with US citizenship who raised a hue and cry over this sum. Boeing's hands were forced and while the amount of compensation paid to each individual victim is not known, in each case it is over USD 1.45 million. In addition, none of the families waived their right to further sue the Boeing Company.

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## WORLD SAVINGS DAY

# Tighten your purse strings, save the planet



AFIA JAHIN

**T**HIS is my moment of truth. When last month I got to know that there was a day called World Thrift Day (that is, today), I immediately decided I had to write about it.

*It is due to the lack of transparency in product supply chains that individual consumers must make a concerted effort to create as little waste as possible.*

After all, who else would be better suited to write about thrift shopping, if not me, the person who has been shopping from Bangladesh's online "thrift" stores (more on that next week) for over a year now and could tell our readers all the ins and outs of this new, niche market?

Of course, woe became me when I realised that World Thrift Day is actually World Savings Day. Meaning that it is a day when we should all be made aware of the benefits of saving money, on personal to national levels.

Unfortunately, I am a spendthrift if I have ever seen one. I got my first proper part-time job at the age of 21 and the impulse-buying of things online (sometimes offline) began with no end in sight. Back then, I could justify my purchases, telling myself that I had always wanted that one thing but could never have asked my parents for it—it's only reasonable that I get it for myself.

So, I kept on spoiling myself and "treating" myself to all that I felt I had missed out on in my childhood and adolescence. Curiously enough, this turned out to include makeup, jewellery, coffee mugs, books that I already had PDFs of (but "oh, nothing compares to the feel of a real book"), jewellery-making tools, trinkets that are still stuffed away in random drawers, paints, canvases, and ten-too-many skirts. It seemed I had loved the film *Confessions of a Shopaholic*

(2009), but learned the wrong lessons from it.

Only now, with my age creeping over the midway mark of my 20s, am I beginning to sober up and ponder before making impulsive purchases. Sometimes, I will wait a bit to think, before messaging a seller or popping open my purse. And while that is some progress, I am nowhere near the amount of financially responsible that I should be if I am to carry myself through my capital-p Plans for even the foreseeable future. But spending too much on things we don't need is quite a universal thing that people of all ages and backgrounds may suffer from. It is also interesting to note how we justify these impulsive purchases that often make us feel shameful and guilty.

To exemplify with an incident, a couple weeks ago, a friend and I visited Mawa ferry ghat, just to kill time and people-watch. At one point, we spotted a child blowing soap bubbles with a bubble maker she had clearly gotten from a vendor nearby. Impulse took hold of us. Our journey from "Should we get one?" to "Absolutely!" to being in front of the vendor was less than a minute long. Once there, we faced a moment of indecision, but unfortunately not over the purchase of the bubble maker itself. We couldn't decide whether to get the basic one (Tk 80) or the one that came with a rattle (Tk 120). Then, my friend said the magic words, "Shokher daam lakh taka," which may translate to "there is no price too high to pay for something you desire." And we got our bubble maker, rattle and all.

However, it only took us about 10 minutes of blowing bubbles and being a spectacle for the other tourists before the less responsible of us lamented, "We really overpaid for this, you know." The other asked, "Shokher daam jeno koto?"

The first sighed, "Lakh taka."

But this is how almost all our purchases go nowadays, especially online. Social media platforms such as Facebook and Instagram, and online shopping websites—despite their fair share of fraudulence—have made it so that we do not buy things we just want. More often than not, we see something on our feed and feel an intense need to possess that object now, that is, in two to five business days. Even if the "want" factor was not there before, once we see a product that is being advertised to us

something that triggers that impulse to hit "buy". Ask yourself: Do I already own something similar to this? Will I use this more than a couple of times? Do I really need this, or even want this? Or is it just desirable in this singular moment? This will require some self-training. And if self-discipline is not your forte, ask a close friend or family member to keep you in check. Discuss a potential purchase with them before making it, and they may help you decide whether your desire is based on need or on impulse.



Things we buy and decide we don't need are easy for us to get rid of, but they stay in our environment for years, decades, and millennia. PHOTO: COLLECTED

based on the data these online platforms have of our preferences, it becomes quite impossible to resist.

So, in this era of easy access to anything money can buy, how do we reduce waste, reuse what we already have, and recycle what we don't need so it becomes useful again?

The simple answer is to have forethought when we come across

Another effective method would be to wait, at least a few days, before making a purchase. If you still feel the need to buy that thing after a week, then feel free to do so. This can be hard to do, especially with online businesses making all their products seem exclusive. But the flipside of late-stage capitalism is that products will only become better and our access to them, globally, will only become

easier. Trust me, that thing you want will still be here a week, month, or year later—perhaps even in a wider variety of options and of better quality.

Above all, though, what is needed from all of us now is to be conscious about what we are buying. The current global culture of individualism is what has led to issues such as the climate crisis and more recently, a Covid-19 vaccine apartheid. What we all are blatantly unaware of is the reverberating impact on the world of every single thing we buy. We each think we are only one person, polluting one tiny space of the vast Earth: "Only one plastic bag is being used to pack the product I've ordered, only two people are being underpaid and overworked to create and deliver that product, only one vehicle is polluting and congesting the roads delivering my impulse buy to me."

But that's just it: we all have this mindset of removing ourselves from the rest of the world, when, in fact, a collective and consistent effort to save our world from further disaster is needed now more than ever before.

Things we buy and decide we don't need are easy for us to get rid of, but they stay in our environment for years, decades, and millennia—polluting our waters, destroying the habitats of sea creatures and killing them, and their production warming our planet closer to the dangerous point of no return. It is due to the lack of transparency in product supply chains that individual consumers must make a concerted effort to create as little waste as possible. And to be a conscious customer now is more than just about protecting our personal savings—it's about extending the lifespan of the Earth.

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

**QUOTABLE Quote**

**HARVEY S. FIRESTONE**  
American businessman (1868 - 1938)

*The growth and development of people is the highest calling of leadership.*

**CROSSWORD BY THOMAS JOSEPH**

**ACROSS**

- 1 Airport line
- 5 Quiche base
- 9 Nebraska city
- 11 Sounds from pounds
- 13 King or czar
- 14 Recess
- 15 Angled pipe
- 16 Repeat
- 18 Toppled, as a monarch
- 20 Spot
- 21 Took to impound
- 22 Relish
- 23 They hold power
- 24 Gloss target
- 25 Supplies with staff
- 27 Like some pools

**DOWN**

- 1 Hollowed out
- 2 Charm
- 3 Writing implements
- 4 Yonder yacht
- 5 Diminished
- 29 Drama division
- 30 New Orleans treat
- 32 Spotted
- 34 Stage signal
- 35 "Skyfall" singer
- 36 City near Carthage
- 38 King of Crete
- 39 Heaps
- 40 Pharaoh symbols
- 41 In — (really)
- 6 Teri of "Tootsie"
- 7 Writing implements
- 8 Enjoys the rink
- 10 Comes up
- 12 Trapshooting
- 17 Poet Hughes
- 19 Holds
- 22 Lively quality
- 24 Sick in bed
- 25 Sir's counterpart
- 26 Maine park
- 27 Spike of film
- 28 Wild cards, at times
- 30 Sanctity
- 31 Rib
- 33 Settle heavily
- 37 Draw

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**BEETLE BAILEY**

WHAT'S THAT SUPPOSED TO BE?

HEY! NICE AIRPLANE!

IT'S OBVIOUSLY AN AIRPLANE.

**BY MORT WALKER**

**BABY BLUES**

ALEXA, WHO IS THE HARDEST-WORKING SECRETARY IN THE OFFICE?

YOU ARE, MISS BUXLEY

ALEXA...WHO PROGRAMMED YOU TO SAY THAT?

**BY KIRKMAN & SCOTT**

**YESTERDAY'S ANSWERS**

P A S S S W I M S  
A L O H A C A N O E  
P A N E S O R A T E  
A M I K A T Y D I D  
L O C U S T A V E  
A L O U P R E S  
A L E T I L E  
R A G C I C A D A  
C R I C K E T L I P  
A M B L E U T I C A  
D E L A Y P O K E R  
E D E N S W E S T