

Child brides are still children, and they need our help

Urgent action must be taken to bring child marriage victims back to school



SHAHEEN ANAM

SHOROLIKA Parveen from Kurigram dreamt of playing in the national football team someday and had even received a best player award from the Prime Minister of Bangladesh. However, that was not to be. The ninth grader became a victim of child marriage during the pandemic, as did seven other footballers in her class. Now, instead of planning the next pass or goal on the football field, they manage households with all its responsibilities. The question is, do her dreams and aspirations have to end with marriage?

At 51 percent, Bangladesh has one of the highest rates of child marriage in the world. The present commitment of the government is to eliminate marriage below 16 years by 2024 and completely eradicate it by 2041 (this deadline has been changed from 2030

to 2041). The Child Marriage Restraint Act 2017 sets the minimum age of marriage for males at 21 years and for females at 18 years, with provisions for punishment of up to five years in jail for offenders. However, till date, we don't know of anyone who has been punished for this offence. The Act contains a clause that allows marriages for girls under 18 in "special cases" or for "the greater good of the adolescent". The special provision was vehemently opposed by child rights and women's rights organisations but has not been removed, giving an excuse to parents and marriage registrars to conduct such illegal marriages.

Women's and child rights activists have found it difficult to prevent child marriage due to multiple factors, such as traditional norms and practices of families that still believe that the earlier a girl is married, the better it is for the reputation of the family. Insecurity and poverty are also major factors. However, another important factor is that those responsible to prevent it are never held to account for failing in their duties. It is well known that women and

children bear the brunt of any disaster, natural or man-made. And so it has been during the Covid-19 pandemic. Domestic violence soared to such levels that the UN Secretary General Antonio Guterres was compelled to issue directives to all member states to address this problem seriously. According to a report by UNICEF from March this year, 10 million more girls are susceptible to child marriage

become victims of child marriage. In Rajshahi, 6,500 girl children have become victims of child marriage, of whom 600 are in one upazila alone. Tangail reported 7,000 students in secondary classes who did not return to school. It is believed this is just the tip of the iceberg, as no national figures are available yet.

The negative impacts of child marriage on the lives of young girls no

moving on to try and prevent further early marriages. We must make a conscious decision together to bring them back to school, and give them a chance of following their dreams and having an independent life. The first step is to bring about a change in mindsets and attitudes. Just because a young girl has been forced into this situation—her life, her dreams and aspirations, should not end there.

There are examples of such positive practices. A partner NGO of MJF in Dinajpur has encouraged at least 56 child brides to return to school and attend classes while they continued to live with their respective husbands. This was done through negotiations with the husbands, in-laws and family members. It required the cooperation of elected officials, local authorities and school teachers. This model of bringing victims of child marriage back to school can be replicated all over Bangladesh. An important policy decision has to be taken not to discontinue their stipends after marriage. This will act as an incentive for families facing economic hardship. Moreover, existing institutions and structures responsible for preventing child marriage at local levels, such as child marriage prevention committees, have to be activated and relevant officials must be held accountable for neglect of their duties.

Finally, the larger question is, what is the worth of a girl in our society? Is she loved and recognised for the joy and care she gives to her family, or is she a burden to be sent away at the first opportunity? It is a matter of national shame that in spite of the Prime Minister's personal commitment to girls' education, we now find classrooms empty of adolescent girls.

We urge the authorities not to treat children and women's rights activists as adversaries. Together, we can take some bold decisions to reject traditional practices that condemn a young girl to a life of household chores, just because she has been illegally married. We need to work in partnership with women's rights organisations, civil society groups, teachers, elected representatives, local authorities and families to join in national campaigns to bring our girls, married or otherwise, back to school.

Shaheen Anam is executive director of Manusher Jonno Foundation.

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Reports of classrooms empty of girls in the ninth and tenth grades are coming from all over Bangladesh.

PHOTO: REUTERS

because of the pandemic.

Around 650 million girls and women who are alive today have been married in childhood, with about half of these child marriages occurring in Bangladesh, Brazil, Ethiopia, India and Nigeria. During the pandemic, given the financial crises families faced, along with closure of schools and insecurity regarding the future, young girls became all the more susceptible to falling prey to such illegal marriages in large numbers. Studies conducted by Manusher Jonno Foundation (MJF) in November 2020 revealed that over 13,000 such marriages took place in 21 districts in the country. In spite of such evidence from multiple sources, no action was taken to reverse the trend. Given the emergency situation, preventing child marriage was not a priority. Saving lives, providing relief to those most affected, getting the economy back on track, etc were deemed to be more important.

As predicted, an alarming situation has come to light after schools reopened on September 1 after 18 long months of closure. Reports of classrooms empty of girls in the ninth and tenth grades are coming from all over Bangladesh. Most absentees have

longer require elaboration. It severely curtails their potential to take decisions, forcing them into a physical and social relationship that they are not prepared for. There are countless stories of the horror young girls face when forced to marry older men who inflict sexual and mental torture on them. Let us not forget the 14-year-old girl from Tangail who died of genital bleeding last year, only a month after she was married to a much older returnee migrant worker. Marital rape is not recognised by the law and the victim has to be below 13 years of age in order to file for rape. There is no punishment for such abuse, torture and sometimes murder, which is hidden under the overall sanction of "marriage".

Given this situation, what can we do? Does a young girl have to forego all her dreams and ambitions just because she is married, and that too, forcefully and illegally? Does she cease to be a child with hopes to fly, to dream and to express herself? Does she become a housewife even if her heart is on the field or in school, playing, laughing and dancing with her siblings and friends? The answer should be an emphatic no.

It is wrong to treat them as married women and abandon them, simply

The subtle and not-so-subtle logic behind fuel price hikes



GOLAM MORTOZA

ON the evening of November 3, the government increased the per litre price of diesel and kerosene oil by Tk 15. The next day, bus owners announced an indefinite strike in protest, and it was activated almost immediately from Friday, November 5. It appeared as if we didn't have an administration that cared enough to ensure millions of students and job-seekers could reach their respective exam centres. Since the strike was announced over the weekend, a discussion with the bus owners—who had announced that public buses would not run until they were allowed to increase fares—could not take place before Sunday. Similarly, trucks and launches also stopped their operations.

Despite the extraordinary sufferings imposed upon the general populace, not an iota of compassion could be seen among the representatives of government. The idea that no discussions can take place over the weekend is a mind-boggling government policy. During these two days, we had to hear and endure some very "subtle" and "not-so-subtle" logic from government decision-makers, where they tried to bolster the decision of hiking fuel prices. In accordance with the owners' wishes, the government increased transport fares on November 7. The decision was taken in the evening and the government's circular also came out in lightning speed. Friday and Saturday are off days, but the evening, which is after work hours, is also considered to be "off" time. However, in order to protect the interests of the transport owners, the government found no obstacles in publishing the circular in the evening, during such off hours.

Once public transport was back on the streets, many bus operators began to collect fares at a rate of 50 to 60 percent above the stipulated prices. The rule that CNG-run buses should not charge increased fares was also widely flouted. In Dhaka, a large number of vehicles run on gas, not diesel, including a portion of long range trucks. It is rumoured that the price of gas will also be increased soon. At that point of time, the fares may be revised again, and diesel-run vehicles are also likely to be included in that probable hike.

For these reasons, the question we must ask is—is the government protecting the interests of a few transport owners rather than that of the general population?

Certain claims have also been made recently on the issue of price hikes being connected to the smuggling of oil to India. It is expected that an explanation from a responsible minister or a government agency will definitely be circumstantial and information-based. However, does any supporting logic or fact exist for this claim? Did the government ask any agency to conduct an investigation in this regard?

No such information exists. Due to the constant vigilance of the BGB and BSF, along with the fact that there are barbed wired fences all around the border, the act of smuggling oil has become quite difficult. The BSF even takes a strong stance against cow smuggling. Journalists who are working around the border areas confirm that no big incidents of oil smuggling takes place these days. Even if some smuggling incidents happen, the amount would be insignificant at best.

Many years ago, Indian trucks would depart with containers filled with oil. It should be mentioned here that, only through the Benapole border, 250 to 300 Indian trucks enter Bangladesh with goods on a daily basis. Each truck has a container capacity of 300 to 400 litres. They used to empty the containers and then fill them up before returning. This method of smuggling has also been stopped. There is now a rule

by the BGB. Even after all this, a certain amount of smuggling might take place, but the amount will never be significant enough to justify a price hike.

Then there is the issue of oil price increase in the international market. The price for unrefined oil has increased, and the Bangladesh Petroleum Corporation (BPC) has been incurring losses over the past five months. The calculation is such—for each litre of diesel, the government had to pay



Even though the government claims to subsidise fuel, they are actually making a profit of Tk 15 to 20 per litre in selling octane.

PHOTO: REUTERS

a subsidy of Tk 2.97, 3.70, 1.58, 5.58 and 13.01 in June, July, August, September and October, consecutively. Thus, from June to October, the BPC has incurred losses worth Tk 1,147.50 crore. However, it is not unusual to see the price of oil going through ups and downs in the international market. The cost of a barrel of oil was USD 83.54 in October. It is assumed that the price will increase further. In a very dubious manner, the energy ministry has decided not to divulge certain information, or to hide it in its entirety. It mentioned that the price of diesel was decreased by Tk 3 and fixed at Tk 65 per litre in 2016. They also mentioned with pride that the price has not been increased even once till 2020. But why didn't they increase the price in these past five years?

Let us ask a better question here. Was the government actually supposed to increase it? As per previously announced government policy, the rule is to adjust the

pricing, not to decrease or increase it. If prices increase on the international market, local prices will get a facelift. Similarly, if prices drop internationally, local prices will face a downward adjustment accordingly. So during the period of 2016 to 2020, how did the international oil market perform? In 2016, one barrel of oil cost USD 43.29. The average prices in 2017, 2018, 2019 and 2020 was USD 50.80, USD 65.23, USD 55.99 and USD 39.68, consecutively. At a certain point

BPC has made a profit of more than Tk 43,000 crore in the last seven years as proceeds from selling oil. Apart from this, the government also gains 28 percent tax and VAT from each litre of unrefined oil. This 28 percent tax and VAT means the government earns Tk 19 per litre. Professor Tamim also mentioned that, apart from the profits earned by BPC, the government gets Tk 9,000 to 10,000 crore as VAT and taxes. It is unquestionable that the government will charge VAT and taxes. However, the question here is why the government took away the Tk 43,000 crore earned by BPC. A policy of stowing away a certain portion of profits for "rainy days" could have saved the day—for example, when prices are increasing in the international market, that fund could have been utilised to subsidise prices.

However, this money has been spent, wasted or swindled in the name of "development" projects. The government is acting like a businessman here. It is making profits by selling oil to the people. The oil importing agency of the government is not following a transparent process—it is not clear at what price they procure oil, what is their transportation costs, etc. There are allegations against them for misdoings on massive levels, but no visible investigation is being conducted. Instead, the government's solution is to increase the price of oil. The welfare of the public is not in their thoughts.

The first wave of Covid-19 led to 2.5 crore people being pushed into poverty. The second wave took the number of new poor to more than three crore. The government has not taken any special initiatives for them. The prices of daily essentials have increased by leaps and bounds. Now diesel, kerosene and LPG gas are also more expensive than ever. Transportation costs also increased. The combined effect of all these will impact all aspects of daily life. It is as if there is no one out there to think about people's livelihoods.

Thus, even though the government claims to subsidise fuel, they are actually making a profit of Tk 15 to 20 per litre in selling octane.

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Golam Mortoza is a journalist at *The Daily Star*. The article has been translated from Bangla.