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AMR a huge public health concern

Authorities must be vigilant in reducing the use of antibiotics in healthcare and food production systems

A recent study conducted by the Institute of Epidemiology, Disease Control and Research (IEDCR) has found that almost all clinically important and widely used antibiotics have lost their effectiveness by more than 50 percent. This is a distressing piece of information that should cause us all a great deal of concern. The IEDCR studied the performance of 21 antibiotics against 10 priority pathogens between 2017 and 2021, and found that five of the most critical medicines listed by the World Health Organization (WHO) are progressively becoming ineffective, leaving us almost defenceless in the face of certain illnesses, including future pandemics.

This increasing ineffectiveness of antibiotics, known widely as antimicrobial resistance (AMR), has been declared by the WHO as one of the top 10 global public health threats facing humanity. One does not have to think too far ahead to consider the severity of the consequences of being unable to treat previously treatable bacteria, viruses and parasites. This will not only impact human health, potentially causing greater suffering and even death; prolonged illnesses as a result of less effective treatment will also increase the financial burden on patients from longer hospital stays, frequent consultations and expensive medicines. This will inevitably create greater stress on the healthcare system as a whole, and will ultimately cost the economy as well.

The WHO identified misuse and overuse of antimicrobials to be the main drivers in the development of such drug resistance. In Bangladesh, experts have also reached the same conclusions—according to a report in this daily, the data indicates that the overuse of antibiotics is driven by practitioners. In this regard, there is no alternative but for the authorities to put forward strict guidelines on antibiotic use, and closely monitor that these guidelines are being followed. A strong movement among health professionals is also required to discourage the overuse of antibiotics—not just in major public and private hospitals, but in every healthcare centre and private clinic across the country.

In many countries, the overuse of antibiotics in food production is a major concern as well. We urge the authorities to look into this issue, too, and ensure that Bangladeshis are not consuming meat from animals that have been stuffed with antibiotics. The world is now beginning to recognise that human health is closely connected to the health of animals and the shared environment—as the Covid-19 pandemic clearly demonstrates—and that the war against AMR needs to be fought on multiple fronts. Armed with this information, we must also take up this battle against AMR, and formulate coherent strategies to ensure that it does not have severe negative consequences for the country and its people.

Rising NPLs is the regulators’ fault

They need to stop rescheduling big loans and strictly implement banking rules

IT is alarming that default loans in the banking sector in Bangladesh have surpassed Tk 1 lakh crore again, despite a relaxed loan classification policy adopted by the central bank. Because of the economic ramifications of the Covid-19 pandemic, the Bangladesh Bank was forced to relax the loan policies, following which the rise in non-performing loans (NPL) came. But now that the economy is getting back on track and businesses are again making profits, some are still refusing to pay back their loans.

What is most unfortunate is that we are not really surprised by any of this. Even before the pandemic hit, the regulators had been granting defaulters—many of whom were wilfully so—absurd amounts of leniency, which experts had warned at that time would have long-term negative impacts for the banking sector. Many large borrowers were able to reschedule their loans ad infinitum using their political connections, violating all banking rules and norms. In fact, regulations in the banking sector have turned meaningless as the regulators have consistently bent them at the will of big businesses that are backed by influential quarters. Then why should we be surprised when others try to take advantage of this? And whose fault is it really that more and more borrowers are now refusing to repay their loans, despite having the means to do so?


When delinquent borrowers were not punished and had their loans rescheduled without any legitimate reasons, what signal did that send to potential borrowers—that they, too, can default on their loans without any repercussions? The impunity granted by the regulators over the years is what has created this tendency among a large number of borrowers now to not repay their loans. Which is why the responsibility for this rise in NPL now falls squarely on the regulators’ shoulders.

The only way to solve this mess is for the regulators to return to applying the banking rules and regulations uniformly for all, and to not give in to political pressure when it comes to making banking-related decisions. In line with that, the regulators must identify the wilful defaulters and, instead of rescheduling their loans over and over again, take all legal measures necessary to try and recover their borrowings.

INTERNATIONAL DAY FOR THE ELIMINATION OF VIOLENCE AGAINST WOMEN

To be free from gender-based violence, we need empowerment

A CLOSER LOOK



TASNEEM TAYEB

have been and still are considered as the inferior sex, always a step behind men—both in terms of their abilities to perform chores requiring physical strength or their intellectual acumen. It is in this biased attitude that misogyny has found a hotbed, and it is this social perspective that has normalised violence against women.

While states and governments in the modern world are trying to break the shackles that bind women to a life of discrimination and abuse—gender equality has been enshrined in the UN-mandated Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) that the nations are working hard to achieve—violence against women is on the rise globally.

Although women have better access to education, skills development opportunities, jobs, and entrepreneurial options in the cities, in the peripheries, the story is quite different altogether. These women and girls live in the murky shadows of male-dominated communities, with no possibility of access to education, let alone income generating activities. And often, these women perish in the obscurity in which they endure life.

Despite some differences in the living standards of the women in the urban and rural settings, one thing is common for the majority of them: violence, often at the hands of their family members—be it the father, brother, husband, uncle, cousin or in-laws.

Violence against women comes in many shapes and forms: physical, sexual, emotional, economic, and political. There are cases where women are subjected to marital rape by their “better half.” Then there are those instances where infants are murdered within hours of their birth by their own fathers. There are incidents of women being tortured mentally and emotionally by their families for various reasons; then there are circumstances where they are not allowed to keep the money they earn. And of course, there are those classic examples of smothered female voices in politics, through intimidation, threats, character assassination, and stoking the ever-present doubt about their leadership capabilities.

These are just the tip of the iceberg. Women are subjected to violence and discrimination day in and day out—at home and outside, at their work place, thorough state policies and institutionalised biases. At times, these are

conscious acts, and at times just a part of social norms. Sometimes, they are done even in the name of cultural and religious practices.

The ongoing global pandemic has only aggravated the plight of women. According to a UN Women report, “two in three women reported that they or a woman they know experienced some form of violence and are more likely to face food insecurity. Only 1 in 10 women said that victims would go to the police for help.” This is based on a study of data collected from 13 countries in the aftermath of the Covid-19 outbreak. According to USAID, about a third of women have faced gender-based violence, which in numbers comes to around 700 million.

In Bangladesh as well, there has been a rise in violence against women. As per a World Health Organization (WHO) report, Bangladesh ranked fourth in the world in gender-based violence by

2020, Brac’s legal aid services received more than 25,000 complaints of gender-based violence. In view of such a high number of formally lodged complaints, one wonders what the actual figures would be, given that many women, girls and their families shy away from making such issues public, let alone seek legal recourse, due to fear of social stigma as well as the hassles and expenses associated with the process.

Child marriage has also seen a spike in Bangladesh during the pandemic. Brac’s community-based women’s group, Polli Shomaj, revealed that in the first 10 months of 2020, child marriage increased by 68 percent, compared to the corresponding period in 2019. Many families, unable to bear the economic brunt of the pandemic, resorted to marrying their daughters off at an early age. But with child marriage comes marital rape, adolescent pregnancy, forced labour, and at times, even death.

her genital bleeding.

Nurnahar is just one of the many young girls who are considered an economic and social burden by their families, and married off early to wash their hands off of unwanted responsibilities. While this case came to prominence, many more girls have died as a direct result of child marriage—during childbirth, due to torture and domestic violence, suicide—without us ever knowing about them.

Gender-based violence is not just a minor social problem; it’s a malady, an endemic, a pandemic itself. It is eating at the heart of all the progress mankind has made. And it has economic implications too: USAID suggests that gender-based violence has been estimated to cost the world more than five percent of global GDP.

However, it is not a problem that can be addressed with a one-dimensional solution. The governments, including ours, need to adopt a multi-pronged approach to address this crisis: awareness, education, and sustainable empowerment.

On the one hand, the governments need to work towards changing the gender bias of the patriarchal societies we live in through mass awareness campaigns, celebrating the innate resilience, energy, and contributions of women—especially the rural women who toil day and night to support the men in their families in their income-generating activities, including farming, animal husbandry, poultry rearing, among others. On the other hand, the governments need to create improved access for girls and women to education, skills development and entrepreneurship training programmes, and then integrate them into mainstream economic activities by providing them with employment or sustainable livelihood generation opportunities. For women, education and skills development are mandatory, as without them income opportunities would remain unutilised, and thus empowerment will not be sustainable or effective.

To this end, the government can collaborate with the development actors working in these areas, in order to be able to enjoy the benefits of their tacit knowledge, experience, community access and best practices.

Empowerment is the only key to ending violence against women. Without this, no matter how many shades of orange you splash, they will be consumed by the bleakness of their lives.

To truly “Orange the World,” we first need to remove the dark tint of the gender-biased lens of our patriarchal society and empower our women with knowledge, and the tools and means of financial freedom. Only then will we be able to ensure a violence-free future for our girls, for our women.

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Gender-based violence is a social malady—it’s a pandemic that is as old as civilisations.

ILLUSTRATION: BIPLOB CHAKROBORTY

intimate partners. Prepared by analysing data between 2000 and 2018, the report suggested that about 50 percent females aged between 15 and 49 have had to endure sexual and physical violence at the hands of their partners in the country.


It got worse during the pandemic. A Manusher Jonno Foundation study, conducted in 27 districts, revealed that 4,249 women and 456 children had to endure domestic violence in April 2020, during the government announced general holidays. The study shed further light on some grim social realities: of the 57,704 women and children interviewed for the study, 1,839 were physically tortured, 4,622 were mentally tortured, 203 suffered sexual violence, and 3,009 women had to face financial hardships due to pressure from their husbands.

A Brac report released last year suggested that in the first 10 months of

The death of Nurnahar—a 14-year-old girl from Tangail—last year, due to excessive genital bleeding as a result of persistent marital rape and a lack of access to medical help is still raw in our memories. The girl’s family, reeling from pandemic-induced economic hardships, gave her in marriage to a 34-year old man named Rajib.

The girl bled from the first night of her marriage, and despite the constant bleeding, her husband kept forcing himself on her. She was taken to a *kobiraj* by her in-laws; they did not allow her medical help. Later, as her condition kept deteriorating, as a last resort, she was taken to a local clinic and finally to Dhaka Medical College Hospital (DMCH). But she succumbed to her internal injuries a few days later. Her mother-in-law later alleged that she had been possessed by demons, which caused

Gender violence is a multi-layered issue, so must its solutions be



SHAHIDA RAHMAN

IMAGINE a society where women and girls don’t have to be afraid. A society where women and girls are treated with the same respect as men and boys, and where they have the freedom to reach their full potential in all aspects of life. One where girls don’t become wives or mothers while they themselves are still children. A society like this, where all women are encouraged to contribute their diverse and necessary strengths, would be a formidable power—economically, educationally, politically and socially. But the prevalent and rising gender-based violence against women, which takes place worldwide, stops this from being a reality. That is where the significance of today’s date stems from. November 25 marks the International Day for the Elimination of Violence against Women. But how did this day come about?

On this day in 1960 in the Dominican Republic, three of the four Mirabel sisters were beaten to death, placed in their car and thrown over a cliff. Raphael Trujillo, the brutal dictator at the time, had made numerous and forceful advances toward one of the sisters. Minerva Mirabel repelled these advances and made it clear she was unimpressed with Trujillo as well as his brutal politics.

Subsequently, the Mirabel sisters became active members of a resistance group protesting Trujillo’s ruthless regime. As Minerva was under close government surveillance after her rejection of Trujillo’s advances, she and her sisters were easy targets for the dictator’s henchmen. The Mirabel sisters, unfortunately, paid the ultimate price for their bravery.

Intelligence, innovation and skills are being wasted as the female bodies and minds that house these strengths are beaten, abused and even burned.

Of abuse from their partners; half of these involved physical assault. Amid the Covid-19 pandemic, violence against women spiked by nearly 70 percent in March and April of 2020, compared to 2019, according to Brac. This has to stop. The prevalence of such violence hurts a nation in multiple ways, one of which is by stunting its growth.

It is time for Bangladesh to tap into its human resource assets of not only men, but women as well. Intelligence, innovation and skills are being wasted as the female bodies and minds that house these strengths are beaten, abused and even burned. Bangladesh, like the

rest of the world, is navigating through the severe impacts of the pandemic, the climate crisis and political unrest.

Wouldn’t it be wise to use every available asset to navigate through such crises and grow meaningfully through these times? Instead of thwarting fertile minds and innovative ideas from women and girls, why not nurture them? Within a patriarchal society, it may take effort and time to tap into the precious commodities hidden in the underutilised minds of women, but raising awareness about the violent crimes which thwart their talents would be a good start.

Violence towards women must not be normalised. It cannot be dismissed with acceptance and a shrug. Silence is dangerous, as it allows for the suppression of women’s potential while allowing oppressors to keep treating them as inferiors. Women must be liberated through the education of their minds and by helping them take control of their own livelihoods.

With heightened awareness and vocalisation, the extremely low conviction rate of cases of violence against women may increase. Currently, when women do report violent crimes, very few reach a successful conviction. This is demoralising to the victim but also discouraging to others who might approach the law for help. But this vicious cycle of justice denied giving way to more violence can be broken. With collective, strong and unwavering voices, laws can be upheld and justice can be served. Women can begin to feel safer in their own communities if authorities back them up with exercising existing laws and replacing ones which do not favour victims of gender violence.

Besides this, it is equally important to ensure that our children are also learning about crimes committed against women and what can be done to decrease them. The next generation is learning, growing

and maturing. Young minds are grasping for truth and knowledge. Now is the time to teach and model equality. Children soak in experiences and follow in the footsteps of their role models.

A young boy who sees his father treating his mother respectfully learns to respect her as well. This can generalise into respecting his sister, the girl next door and a girl at school. Similarly, a young boy who is reprimanded for hitting his sister or using his physical strength to intimidate her will learn that his behaviour was wrong.

Treating sons and daughters equally within the family incorporates this sense of justice into the rest of a child’s life. Seeing the females in their family being respected and listened to just as the males are is crucial. Expecting equal behaviour from both a son and a daughter, and listening to both sends a clear message: “You are both equal.”

But sons are not the only children in this equation. Girls should also be taught to stand up for themselves more. When a girl’s ideas and opinions are listened to as respectfully as her brother’s, she learns that her thoughts and ideas are just as valuable as a male’s—a view that should be the norm. Equality in the family therefore leads to equality in the community.

The rise of violence towards women has been called a shadow pandemic—a frightening result of the effects of Covid-19 on our communities. But luckily, we can all take steps to combat this in our own small and big ways. From November 25 to December 10, during the 16 Days of Activism against Gender-Based Violence, join UN Women and the rest of the world to right this wrong, and so we don’t just have to *imagine* a society where women and girls aren’t afraid.

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