

Development of DU must preserve its history and traditions

Efforts are needed to improve the standard of education, research activities

THE Dhaka University authorities have undertaken a new master plan to expand its campus vertically to accommodate a growing number of students, teachers and staff. Under it, 97 high-rise buildings—including new academic buildings, dormitories, teachers' quarters, a modern standard library, medical centre, etc—will be built and 599 old structures will be demolished. The plan also involves modern parking facilities, new roads with cycling lanes and walkways, playgrounds, etc, among other things.

While we support the DU authorities' plans to expand to meet the demand of the time, we cannot help expressing our concerns about what would happen if they are not executed efficiently, taking into consideration the opinions of experts, teachers and students on how the campus should be. Currently, 40,000 students, 2,000 teachers and 4,000 staffers at DU face severe accommodation problems, and the vertical expansion of the 304-acre campus would surely be beneficial for them. However, urban planners have expressed worries regarding the high-rise model's impacts on the university's environment, and educationists and former professors have also opined against radical changes that may affect the historic institution's existing character.

We would also like to ask the DU authorities: alongside its structural development, are there concrete plans to improve overall educational standards of the university? Will they invest more in research, where the university is still lagging behind? If only a fraction of the Tk 9,000 crore budget for the new master plan could be invested in research facilities, the quality of education could improve significantly. We request the DU authorities to make efforts to address these issues, alongside necessary investments in structural development.

We also urge the authorities to take every decision cautiously when it comes to demolishing old structures—Madhur Canteen, Arts Building, Faculty of Fine Arts building, Curzon Hall and many others in DU have immense historical value and must not be harmed in any way. As recommended by experts, there should be absolute transparency, and the country's modern architects, aestheticians, urban planners and environmentalists should be involved in every step.

Preserving the greenery and open spaces of the campus must remain a priority. The DU campus currently houses 985 buildings, which take up 26 percent of the total space. Reportedly, according to the new plan, concrete structures will occupy only 21 percent of the total space. We hope this will translate into reality when the plan is implemented. In simple words, any development plan of Dhaka University must be directed towards creating a knowledge-based environment on campus, that will have the necessary facilities while also preserving the area's historic character.

The looming threat of Omicron

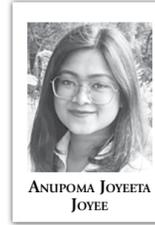
Authorities must ramp up vaccination efforts immediately

WITH the threat of the new Covid-19 variant Omicron looming in the distance, Bangladesh will have to go all out to contain the rogue virus, especially as the country is only just beginning to recover from the severe repercussions the pandemic has had over the last two years—in terms of loss of lives, as well as the burden created on the economy and healthcare systems. The new "variant of concern", with high transmissibility potential, is said to have already gained a foothold in 40 different countries in Africa, Asia, the Americas, the Middle East and Europe. Recently, the WHO warned Asia-Pacific countries to boost healthcare capacity and fully vaccinate their people to prepare for a surge in Covid-19 cases.

Last week, the authorities decided that incoming passengers from certain southern African countries will have to be in institutional quarantine. While we appreciate these efforts to contain the variant, given that it has also spread to quite a few other countries outside of the known epicentre, we are confused why the restrictions are also not being applied to non-African countries with high numbers of Covid-19 cases. We urge the government to be extremely cautious and implement strict travel restrictions, including screening at all entry points, checking of vaccine certificates and quarantine, whether at home or other facilities.

It must also be noted that the WHO has warned countries that while travel curbs could buy time while the world decides how to deal with this new variant, only travel restrictions cannot be the answer. There is no alternative to boosting healthcare capacity and implementing mass vaccination drives. In Bangladesh, so far, 36 percent of the population has received the first dose of the vaccine, and only 21.5 percent have received the second dose. While this is good progress when compared to many other countries, this is nowhere near enough to prevent community transmission of Omicron.

In Bangladesh's previous experience with Covid-19 waves, we have witnessed the public healthcare system struggling to cope, especially with critical patients who require oxygen and specialist care. This time around, we cannot wait for a new wave to occur before steps are taken to support hospitals and healthcare providers. We hope the government has learned important lessons while fighting Covid-19 since early 2020, and that health-related policies will now be proactive rather than reactive. Investment in manpower and logistics is of utmost importance at this juncture, and necessary healthcare facilities must be made fully functional to face the possibility of Omicron finding its way into the country.



ANUPOMA JOYEETA JOYEE

Nothing that I have to say in this article in criticism of the failures in government policy is new or clever. It is merely the umpteenth rehashing of the anger and frustration that the women of

Bangladesh feel every day, both in public and in private.

More than a year after momentous feminist protests around the country and a writ petition questioning the legality of marital rape, the heinous crime has still not been criminalised. While it is by no means the most significant problem plaguing our sexual offence related laws, its criminalisation is one of the many reforms that might elevate our flagrantly antiquated laws into a somewhat more acceptable and equitable version.

Bangladesh does not have a single codified statute dealing with sexual offences. Section 375 of the Penal Code 1860 specifically states that non-consensual forced intercourse with a woman is rape unless it is committed by a husband upon his wife. Only if the wife is younger than 13, the said act of non-consensual forced intercourse would be considered rape. Not only is this definition as strict, inadequate and inflexible as it gets, but it also fails to allow male and transgender victims, and wives raped by husbands, to come forward. There is also a glaring lack of harmony among our multiple scattered provisions when it comes to defining rape. For instance, section 9(1) of the Women and Children Repression Prevention Act 2000 says that wives under the age of 16 (inconsistent with the Penal Code 1860) can be raped by their husbands. Not one, but two messy and dubious definitions later, we still don't have any acknowledgment of a terrible offence which probably happens to hundreds of women every day behind closed doors.

Crimes, punishment and morality are a reflection of the sociopolitical climate of a country. Threatening women with rape and violence has long been used as a weapon in our culture. It is not about sexual gratification or pleasure as much as it is about exerting power. Whether a Hindu home is being burned down or a student is being berated for wanting to pay half fare

on public transport—men feel comfortable topping the attack off with a casual threat of rape. Perpetrators know the odds are stacked against the victim and she will probably never go through the traumatic ordeal of seeking justice. So, in a culture where random men believe they can exert power over women for any reason whatsoever, why isn't our Parliament willing to afford women some basic safety by criminalising rape by their husbands, since exerting power as a husband is so much easier than on the streets, and statistically more probable?

In October 2020, amidst already ongoing protests, a 14-year-old child bride from Tangail died due to excessive genital bleeding as a result of repeated forced intercourse by her 34-year-old

ignore the plight of women in this country. So far, there has been no action from the government. All we received in response of the protests was a lazy handout in the form of capital punishment as a penalty for rape, which at best will deter more women from reporting their rape and at worst, induce the rapists to kill their victims.

"...The idea that a wife by marriage consents in advance to her husband having sexual intercourse with her whatever her state of health or however proper her objections... is no longer acceptable. It can never have been other than a fiction, and fiction is a poor basis for the criminal law." In 1991, this groundbreaking judgment was delivered in R v R, criminalising what was once

the protests by hordes of men that would ensue in the wake of such an amendment allowing women to have control over their own bodies. On top of that external fear, we also need to ask whether our male-dominated Parliament itself would get enough affirmative votes to pass the amendment. After all, legislative bodies are simply a microcosm of society at large and it is no secret that our society at large is severely misogynistic. There is also a strange obsession in our culture about keeping our moral fabric intact or with preserving the "sanctity" of the institution of marriage. If this is a concern at all in their minds when it comes to criminalising marital rape, then we need to ask why we want to save marriages in which a husband rapes his wife.

For the most part, by not criminalising marital rape, lawmakers are pandering to the idea that, even in theory, the wife does not deserve to have equal rights in the conjugal relationship and to have autonomy over her own body. I say "in theory" because, in practice, seeking justice against marital rape would be even more difficult for a woman than for non-marital rapes. For starters, she would be talked into not pressing charges by family members; the police would laugh the case off and try to convince her to sort it out with her husband; and if she ever reaches the court, the trauma of the ordeal would haunt her forever, or maybe some judge would have the audacity to question why she did not come forward within 72 hours of her husband raping her.

There is no doubt that our laws are scarcely implemented due to the gatekeeping of society and judicial hurdles. When there are laws in concrete existence, we at least have an option to demand justice. However, in the absolute absence of laws, a survivor of marital rape has no way to have her sufferings legally acknowledged. If the state cares about the women of this country, they have to manifestly show it via actions and criminalise this act at once. If the lawmakers sitting inside our Parliament went through the actual lived experiences of an everyday woman in this country, they would find that not only are women in Bangladesh at risk on the streets, but also inside their own homes. I am not sure if this revelation would make any of our lawmakers a bit uncomfortable; however, this reality makes every woman in this country profoundly sad.

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16 DAYS OF ACTIVISM AGAINST GENDER-BASED VIOLENCE

Why does marital rape continue to be normalised?

We still don't have any acknowledgment of a terrible offence which probably happens to hundreds of women every day behind closed doors.

COLLAGE:
KAZI TAHSHIN AGAZ APURBO



husband. It brought to light the issue of marital rape once again. It consequently prompted a writ petition that argued that section 375 of the Penal Code 1860 and section 9(1) of the Women and Children Repression Prevention Act 2000 discriminate against the victims of rape based on their marital status. The High Court Division issued a rule nisi in favour of the petitioners and asked the government to show cause as to why the marital rape exceptions in these sections should not be declared as void and why they should accordingly not be repealed.

While the Bangladesh judiciary has taken a step in the right direction by issuing this rule nisi, our lawmakers, however, have chosen to completely

considered "impossible" in English legal concept. It arose out of a wife alleging attempted rape by her husband in the House of Lords. Following this decision, marital rape was statutorily criminalised in England in 1994.

In sheer frustration, I have asked myself this question time and again: What is the excuse or justification for not criminalising marital rape in Bangladesh, something that is unequivocally considered an offence in about 150 countries? What likely scenarios do our MPs think will occur if one of them decides to introduce amendments of these antiquated and deeply misogynistic laws of our country?

The government is perhaps afraid of

Brazil's pioneering solution to vaccine shortages

JOSEPH E STIGLITZ, ACHAL PRABHALA and FELIPE CARVALHO

The World Trade Organization was supposed to meet this week to consider a proposal that has been languishing for the past year: A temporary waiver of pharmaceutical intellectual property during the pandemic to allow poor countries to make many of the same tests, treatments and vaccines that rich countries have had throughout the pandemic. Yet, in a cruel reminder of the urgency of the problem, the WTO meeting was postponed, owing to the emergence of the Omicron variant, detected by scientists in South Africa (though precisely where it originated remains unclear).

There is near-unanimous agreement that vaccinating the entire world is the

Donations haven't solved the problem, because no country has surplus vaccines in the multiple billions that are needed. Philanthropy, too, has fallen short. The Covid-19 Vaccine Global Access (COVAX) facility, an international consortium that promised to send two billion vaccine doses to poor countries by the end of 2021, has shipped only 25 percent of that amount.

The world is not making as many vaccines as it could. Every firm in every country that has the capacity to make vaccines should be doing so. Yet after paying Moderna, Johnson & Johnson, and Pfizer/BioNTech to develop their vaccines, the US and German governments are unwilling to require these companies to share their technology with manufacturers in other countries.

Unless these governments change their

There is a simple reason why poorer countries don't have enough vaccines: There aren't enough doses to go around. Donations haven't solved the problem, because no country has surplus vaccines in the multiple billions that are needed.

And it would provide for the transfer of vaccine know-how—something like a manufacturing instruction manual—to alternative pharmaceutical manufacturers.

In September, Brazilian President Jair Bolsonaro signed the bill into law, but not before using his veto powers to remove or revise crucial clauses, including those specifying when and how the law would come into effect, and those requiring pharmaceutical companies to share their know-how, data and biological material. One month later, the Brazilian Senate recommended charging Bolsonaro with "crimes against humanity" for causing unnecessary loss of life in the pandemic. But the charges did not include his mangling of the IP bill—an act that could lead to even more unnecessary loss of life.

The law returned to the Senate, which can override Bolsonaro's vetoes. But the Senate missed its deadline for rectifying the legislation, and then failed to set another. It now must move quickly to eliminate the uncertainty created by Bolsonaro's cuts, as well as withstand resistance by pharmaceutical-industry associations from the US and Europe, whose leaders tried to kill the bill, even threatening to cut off vaccine supplies if Brazil followed through.

Brazilian lawmakers must keep their eyes on the prize. They have drafted a law that would dismantle the pharmaceutical monopolies that are blocking a solution to the pandemic. There is a lesson here for everyone—both those asking the WTO for a waiver and those opposing it. As goes Brazil, so will go others. As for the world's richest countries and the institutions beholden to them, it remains to be seen how much of their credibility they are willing to sacrifice in the service of enabling pharmaceutical companies to enjoy their monopoly profits just a bit longer.

We are fighting a war on two fronts: one against Covid-19, the other against the pharmaceutical companies whose profits depend on high prices and restricted output. Sooner or later, we will realise, as Brazil already has, that we cannot prevail on the first front without winning on the second.



There is near-unanimous agreement that vaccinating the entire world is the only way to end the pandemic.

PHOTO: REUTERS

only way to end the pandemic. The higher the vaccination rate, the fewer chances the virus will have to acquire dangerous mutations. Before quickly becoming the leading global variant, Delta was first detected in India, where under three percent of the population had been vaccinated. Today, Africa has the world's lowest vaccination rates, with only seven percent of Africans having been fully vaccinated.

There is a simple reason why poorer countries don't have enough vaccines: There aren't enough doses to go around.

position, the companies will continue to exploit the lucrative monopoly power granted to them by the WTO's Agreement on Trade-Related Aspects of Intellectual Property Rights (TRIPS), which was created when the organisation was formed in 1995. According to WTO Director-General Ngozi Okonjo-Iweala, the proposal for a TRIPS waiver is "stuck." Though the number of rich countries opposing it has dwindled, there is still enough opposition to thwart a solution.

But while the WTO dithers, Brazil has taken matters into its own hands, giving

us the closest thing we have to a way out of this crisis. In April, Brazilian Senator Paulo Paim proposed a bill that would allow the country to bypass the barriers erected by TRIPS. The legislation seizes on the fact that, as the trade law scholar Frederick Abbott explained to us, "Article 73 of the TRIPS agreement, covering the protection of security interests, already provides each government with the authority to take whatever action it considers necessary to address the Covid-19 pandemic, including suspending intellectual property rights."

If this option is already available, why are so many countries still waiting around for the WTO to grant them formal permission? The answer is that ever since the WTO's creation, rich countries have punished developing countries for doing what they are entitled to do under the organisation's own rules. When South Africa, Brazil, India, and Thailand sought to override monopolies on unaffordable anti-retroviral drugs during the HIV/AIDS crisis, the United States and the European Union put them on trial—sometimes literally. This history has created a chilling effect.

The current waiver proposal, therefore, would operate like a promise from the big kids not to bully the others during recess. Brazil's response represents another option: the bullying victims can take control of their own circumstances. The new legislation attracted support from across the political spectrum, passing both the Brazilian House and Senate with large majorities. Among other things, the bill sought to establish a permanent provision for overriding IP monopolies on essential technologies needed to address health emergencies (beginning with the Covid-19 pandemic).

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