

Stop harassing families of the disappeared

Govt must give them protection, find their missing relatives

WE are extremely concerned at the way police have reportedly harassed the families of the victims of enforced disappearance. According to a report by this daily, a number of families alleged that they were being coerced by police into signing pre-written statements “admitting” that they had deliberately misled the authorities by concealing information about their “missing” relatives. According to Mayer Daak, a platform for the families of disappearance victims, police have visited at least 10 such families recently and forced them to change their statements (in the General Diaries). Reportedly, while some of the families were able to avoid signing the statements, others had to give in to the pressure. They claimed that law enforcers were doing this to deflect blame from themselves, although the latter have denied the allegations saying that through their visits to the families they only wanted to “update” their information as part of their investigations.

It has been widely reported in the media how plainclothes officers picked up many of the victims. But in most cases, their families could not file any case despite the fact that there was enough circumstantial evidence suggesting the former’s involvement, according to human rights activists. These families could mostly only file GDs, and now they are being forced to retract their claims.

As has been reported in the media, some of the incidents of enforced disappearance happened many years ago. So, what prompted the police to suddenly start putting pressure on their families? This, we think, may have something to do with recent international pressures, now that some of the country’s institutions have been identified and sanctioned for human rights violations. Clearly, our law enforcement agencies are trying to clear their names in the wrong way: instead of finding the “disappeared”, they are further victimising them and their families.

The questions here are: If the police terrorise ordinary citizens instead of protecting them, where will they go? Also, why couldn’t we, as a country, still develop a system that protects the victims rather than terrorising them? The families of the victims of enforced disappearance are seeking protection from the state, quite deservedly, but are being harassed instead. They also want their plight to be recognised by the state. This is an important point as state officials have often rubbished disappearance claims by saying the victims had fled away of their own volition. If this is indeed the case, the burden of proof falls on the state, not the victims.

We urge the government to take this matter in the manner it deserves and give specific directives to our law enforcement agencies to stop harassing these families, ensure their security, as well as find the missing individuals through proper investigations. Such coercion and high-handedness by the police force against general citizens are condemnable. This will only damage the country’s image.

We need a workable traffic control system

A capital city cannot function without one

NOTHING seems to have worked with the capital’s traffic signal system even after spending Tk 119 crore over the last 15 years. Its method of controlling traffic flow on the roads remains as primitive as ever, with traffic policemen jumping right in front of running cars and using their hands to direct vehicular movement. Even ropes, cones and bamboo fences are used to control the extremely disorderly city traffic.

Dhaka ranked 10th in terms of poor traffic management among 228 cities in the World Traffic Index 2020, and to substantiate the veracity of the ranking, one only needs to go out in a motorised vehicle during office hours. Almost every working day, city roads get clogged by thousands of vehicles of every description from dawn to dusk. According to Buet’s Accident Research Institute (ARI), in 2021, the country lost an estimated Tk 55,685 crore because of traffic congestion in Dhaka city.

It is no surprise that urban transport experts blame an unworkable traffic management system and unrealistic projects for the situation. They also point to impractical permits given to new vehicles that are way beyond the road capacity, contributing to the traffic congestion. Poor road conditions, defective public transport, jaywalking and movement of non-motorised vehicles also contribute to worsening the tailback. The following remarks by Buet experts are quite telling: “We are allowing vehicles without considering the road capacity. No signal system will work with this existing pressure of vehicles. We must think of striking a balance between road capacity and number of vehicles.”

In their bid to modernise the capital’s traffic control system, a number of ambitious projects have been undertaken over the past decades, including digitising signal lights, installing countdown timers and digital display boards installed at some major intersections. But experts say that in many cases, projects were taken up without considering the rising number of vehicles and overall road conditions. Also, the system was initiated based on a flawed plan, without taking traffic volume and speed into consideration. As a result, after expensive trials and errors, officials of the two city corporations and the traffic police department were forced to ditch the new signal systems and return to manual traffic management. We urge the traffic management authorities to find a system that really works for our fast-growing capital.

How to secure jobs amid looming automation



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ON December 19, *The Daily Star* published a refreshing story that offered a window into the changing landscape of our job market. Electronics manufacturers, according to the report, are scrambling for graduates from the polytechnic institutes, often recruiting them straight from the campus. It appears that those graduates are not looking for jobs; jobs are finding them instead.

In a different case, Luna, a junior nurse, administers injections for my mother. She qualified as a nurse a few years ago but is already in two separate jobs. “No one wants to let me go,” Luna chuckles, in response to my question about her profession.

These are two random cases where there simply aren’t enough graduates to meet the demand of the job market. Unfortunately, Bangladesh’s overall employment situation is not as encouraging.

For example, a December 2019 study by the Bangladesh Institute of Development Studies (BIDS) paints a bleak picture of employment, with the average rates of full-time employment and unemployment being at 43 percent and 33 percent, respectively. That means, among other things, that the skills of most of the job-seekers are not aligned with industry demands. Should Bangladesh’s educated youth continue being underemployed or unemployed? Or should they learn necessary skills to cater to the country’s current and future industrial and social needs?

In its “The Future of Jobs” report (October 2020), the World Economic Forum (WEF) predicts that by 2025 the Fourth Industrial Revolution with its automation boom will replace 85 million jobs worldwide. It will also create 97 million new tech-oriented jobs. The report lists ten professions that will diminish, including that of data entry clerks and factory workers. It mentions another ten sectors that will create new positions (e.g. data scientists and process automation specialists). The WEF forecasts that only the tech-related jobs will remain relevant while manual work will gradually go to automation. But it reassures us that the 4IR will create more jobs than it will eliminate, as did the previous industrial revolutions.

Such a simplistic view of the future may not apply everywhere. Countries differ in socio-economic conditions,



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PHOTO: WHO BANGLADESH/ TATIANA ALMEIDA

state of industrialisation, population structure, and skill level, among other things. Besides, it is not only factory workers or data entry clerks who may become redundant because of automation. Any predictable intellectual work is also susceptible to automation because software can perform it. Many stable earning jobs such as those of

Midwifery Council (BNMC). No wonder many nurses have two jobs. The global scenario in the nursing profession is not much different either. A study by the British Centre for Health and Social Care Research estimates that shortage of nurses will stand at 7 million globally by 2030. There aren’t enough new nurses to fill up the vacancies created

copywriters, journalists or medical image analysts are vulnerable, too. Software will make such jobs so easy that a low-wage worker with some training can accomplish them. Manual work is at lower risk of automation as it requires operating an expensive robot, as opposed to software. Even if robots take over much of the manual work, that will create new demands for robot technicians with hands on skills. That’s good news for the polytechnic graduates with technical backgrounds; their skills will remain relevant and further possibilities may open up.

Here is one example. Trained operators somewhere in the USA can fly drones in Afghanistan, Syria, or Libya to carry out surveillance activities. Similarly, technicians can also operate and repair machines anywhere in the world, provided they have the required skills and dexterity—and that too at a fraction of the cost.

Meanwhile, Luna and others like her will continue to receive more job offers. Why? The World Health Organization (WHO) reports, as per 2011 estimates, that there are about 3.05 physicians and 1.07 nurses per 10,000 people in Bangladesh. The situation has worsened over the subsequent decade which the Covid-19 pandemic has exposed. Bangladesh has only 24 percent of the nurses it needs, according to Bangladesh Nursing and

by retiring ones. Higher life expectancy has resulted in an increasing number of adult populations requiring more nurses. The USA will need 175,900 new nurses each year until 2029. For the UK, the nursing crisis has severely affected its ability to fight the Covid-19 situation. In Australia, a federal government agency predicts a shortfall of 85,000 nurses by 2025 and 123,000 by 2030. Automation is unlikely to be of any help to these developed countries.

Robots are still a long way from offering the empathy, care, and dexterity that the profession requires. Human nurses will remain in high demand for many more years. Only they have the skills to solve problems in unpredictable environments that nurses often face. Populous countries such as Bangladesh can benefit from such a situation.

Bangladesh must look at its own needs and the global market demands. The automation trend will increase in every sector, more or less. The country will require an adequately trained workforce that only relevant technical training can produce. It will also need many more nurses to deliver quality healthcare services that are also essential for sustained economic growth. Bangladesh will not have to send unskilled workers to foreign lands or sell low-tech products anymore. Instead, it can offer higher-value skill, knowledge, and care to the world.

Climate action incomplete without women’s contribution

Joyce Chimbi is a Kenya-based journalist who focuses on climate change, gender and health. Copyright: Inter Press Service

JOYCE CHIMBI

JUDY Wangari is one of an estimated 800,000 smallholder potato farmers who, according to the National Potato Council of Kenya, contribute at least 83 percent of the total potato production.

In a good season, her two acres in Molo in Kenya’s Rift Valley region produce between 60 kg and 80 kg bags of potato per acre. Due to drastic and erratic weather patterns, Wangari says that a good season is often not guaranteed.

“The rains come too early or too late. Two years after I started potato farming back in 2018, I lost all my potatoes to heavy rainfall,” she says.

Women make up 75 percent of the agricultural labour force in this East African nation.

Overall, women also manage approximately 40 percent of the smallholder farms. As pillars of food production and largely lacking in financial and technical support, women are increasingly exposed to the effects of climate change and consequent land degradation.

“We may be in the same storm, but we are definitely not in the same boat. Nowhere is this truer than for women in the face of climate change,” says Patricia Scotland, the Secretary-General of the Commonwealth.

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A Commonwealth report titled Gender Integration for Climate Action: A Review of Commonwealth Member Country Nationally Determined Contributions (NDCs), presented at the recent UN climate summit COP26, shows how underrepresentation of women in climate policies and plans, poor access to climate finance, technologies, and lack of capacity for effective decision-making compound inequality.

The lack of representation also creates a barrier to women fully contributing to climate action, reinforcing the circle, and continuing vulnerability.

However, the report also showed that countries are increasingly acknowledging the vulnerability and inequality of women in climate action, taking concrete steps to address it.

At the heart of the review is a macro-level overview of the extent of gender integration in NDCs—the technical term for national climate action plans under the Paris Agreement—in Commonwealth member countries.

Overall, 65 percent of Commonwealth countries included gender as a cross-cutting or mainstreaming priority in new or updated NDCs.

Countries have also identified challenges, particularly in finance, where international support is urgently needed.

The role of women in smart agriculture practices, including agro-processing, is now embraced all across the small island nation of Saint Lucia. While not the main economic stay, agriculture contributes significantly to the country’s revenue.

“Noteworthy, women have assumed entrepreneurial roles over regular farming skills, in women-only farming groups. Consequently, as entrepreneurs, women can actively influence the

strategic decision-making requirements necessary for the agriculture sector to become more climate-resilient,” says the country’s Chief Sustainable Development and Environment Officer, Annette Rattigan-Leo.

Experts such as Aina-Maria Iteta, head of Monitoring and Evaluation Unit at the Environmental Investment Fund in Namibia, are quick to point out that even though the review finds considerable progress towards gender representation in policies, plans and strategies, additional financial and technical support is needed.

“There is a gap in the budgeting of climate action on gender, overall. Gender initiatives or actions are always planned and funded on an ad hoc basis making it difficult to ensure this goal of gender mainstreaming in climate action is achieved,” Iteta says. “The Commonwealth can facilitate access to financing gender climate-action initiatives.”

“Capacity-building specific to strategic gender budget approaches is an area that can benefit from the Commonwealth Climate Finance Access Hub’s expertise. With the country’s existing financial constraints, especially in the face of Covid-19 related recovery efforts, it would help to determine the best entry points,” Rattigan-Leo says.

For local farmers such as Wangari, the help cannot come soon enough because they continue to struggle to survive and provide for their families on the front lines of climate change.

“If we do not tackle climate change with sufficient urgency and success, those on the wrong end of inequalities, especially women, will bear the hardest burden,” Secretary-General Scotland concluded.