

# The Daily Star

FOUNDER EDITOR: LATE S. M. ALI

## Student suicide is now a serious threat

### Authorities must have targeted measures for struggling young people

IT is deeply worrying that an increasing number of students are suffering from mental health issues, which of late also saw a concurrent rise in suicides in Bangladesh. As a study by the non-profit Aachol Foundation found, at least 101 students at tertiary level died by suicide last year, while the number was 79 in 2020. This is in stark contrast to the 11 tertiary-level students who died by suicide in 2018, and 19 who died in 2017. Suicide is generally underreported, so the actual number could be higher. Although we still don't have the overall national suicide data of the past year, it is undeniable that the pandemic, with its multidimensional effects on life, has worsened people's mental health condition.

The government currently spends only 0.44 percent of the national budget on mental health. Worse, there are reportedly only 0.073 psychiatrists per 100,000 people in the country. It didn't also help that the Mental Health Act, 2018, which replaced the archaic Lunacy Act, failed to provide for the establishment of more area-specific mental healthcare centres. This means that most practitioners are still concentrated in major urban areas. Although private hospitals do provide relatively good services, they are often accessible to higher income segments of the population only.

Given the dire state of mental health services, and the stigma attached to mental health even in educated households, it's no surprise that the effects of the pandemic have further worsened the situation, leading to higher rates of suicide. Students, in particular, have been badly affected by the drastic shift in their educational systems and the soul-deep uncertainty over their future. Most affected among them were male students—two out of three victims of suicide in 2021 were male—which again shows how men in our culture are discouraged from displaying emotions of sadness and distress. So while women may eventually seek professional help for their mental health issues, men often cannot.

There is clearly an urgent need to invest more resources in getting our mental healthcare up to the mark, just as we need to prepare well for the ongoing surge in Covid cases. More expert practitioners need to be employed in the public sector so that help is more accessible for everyone. For struggling students, this means more targeted measures—not just by psychiatrists, but teachers, parents and academic administrators as well. There is also a need for awareness programmes to help people learn about mental health illnesses and eliminate the stigma surrounding them. Mental health issues may not be as visible as physical ailments, but their consequences are just as dangerous.

## Time to address the social cost of migration

### Families of migrant workers need assistance to live with dignity

WHILE the contributions of our migrant workers to the economy are often glorified by policymakers and government agencies, the pitfalls of migration, especially its social cost, remain largely unaddressed. Not much research has been done on the condition of the migrant workers' families—how they are coping with social pressures in the absence of the only earning members of their families. A report by this daily on January 29, 2022 looked into the lives of the female members of such families and found that they were in a vulnerable condition, barely surviving with the little money their husbands send back home. Many women find it hard to send their children to school due to financial instability.

Reportedly, in most cases, the migrants collect money for migration by selling what little land they have or by borrowing money from lenders at a high interest rate. And after the men in the families leave for foreign lands, it is their wives who have to face the lenders who put pressure on them to pay off the debt. This is more or less the situation of many migrant workers' families.

A research study published by the Refugee and Migratory Movements Research Unit (RMMRU) in 2020 provides some insight on the issue. The study was carried out on 831 women and 1,784 children who were left behind in different migration-prone districts. It revealed that, although economic gains of migration are enjoyed by the nation at large as well as by the migrant households as a unit, the social costs of migration are mostly borne by the individual household members. According to the study, the women in such families are not only overburdened with responsibilities, but they also go through psychological stress and have to regularly encounter the social perception that they are "leading a comfortable life by spending their husbands' hard-earned money," which is unfortunately not the case for the majority of them. The study also finds that 15 percent of the children in such families have failed to cope with their situation.

As our migrants toil away in foreign lands for a better future, their families at home cannot be left to suffer like this. The government should take initiatives to help these families—not only by financially assisting those in need, but by providing counselling support as well. The local government bodies can arrange awareness programmes with an aim to change the social attitude towards the families. The Wage Earners' Welfare Board of the migrants should also come forward with their assistance. And special attention must be given to the children of such families at school, so they don't feel left behind.

# Aren't we all entitled to cleaner air?



MACRO MIRROR

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FAHMIDA KHATUN

AIR pollution is one of the deadliest environmental concerns for human beings. In 2019, it contributed to 6.7 million deaths worldwide. Worryingly, 20 percent of newborn deaths in the world have been due to air pollution. In the State of Global Air Report 2020, it is ranked fourth among global risk factors for mortality, after high blood pressure, tobacco consumption, and poor diet.

Victims of air pollution are mostly the poor as their exposure is higher than others'.

They live in large cities without basic amenities. Currently, nearly half of the world's population live in the cities—which is likely to rise to 70 percent by 2050. Bangladeshi cities are vulnerable to air pollution due to vehicular emissions, industrial pollution, and large-scale construction activities. Large cities such as Dhaka are particularly vulnerable to air pollution. Urbanisation is a natural process and a global phenomenon, but urbanisation in Dhaka is alarming. It is overcrowded—the densest city in the world in terms of population size. Like all megacities in the world, Dhaka attracts millions of people from all over the country for better economic opportunities. However, a large number of them end up working in the informal sector and living in poor conditions with limited facilities. Infrastructural development and other basic services fall far short of what the city's residents require. They also become victims of environmental pollution, which is more acute in this megacity—according to the Air Quality Index (AQI), Dhaka is one of the worst polluted cities in the world.

According to the State of Air Quality Report 2020, Bangladesh was ranked ninth among the top 10 countries with the highest population-weighted annual average PM2.5 exposures in 2019. PM2.5 indicates atmospheric particulate matters with a diameter of 2.5 micrometres or smaller. PM2.5 affects lung functions and can cause asthma and heart problems. Exposure to PM2.5 for a long period can



▲ **Having laws and policies to curb air pollution is not enough—they have to be implemented effectively and entirely, without outside interference.**

FILE PHOTO: STAR

increase chronic bronchitis and reduce lung functions. There is also PM10 (particulate matter with a diameter of 10 micrometres or smaller) in Dhaka's air, which is no less harmful. PM10 can enter the lungs through the throat and nose and can cause asthma, bronchitis, heart disease, and stroke. Both PM2.5 and PM10 can cause premature deaths as well.

followed up with the formulation of the Environmental Conservation Rules, 1997, which determines the emission level of pollutants according to the nature of the industries. Another important step was enacting the environment court laws in 2000 and 2010 to take measures for offences related to environmental pollution. The other relevant policies include the National Environmental Policy, 2018, and Brick Manufacturing and Brick Kiln Establishment (Control) Act, 2013 (amended in 2021). Some sections of the Road Transport Act, 2018 also stipulate controlling motor vehicle emissions.

While all these are positive initiatives, their implementation is quite challenging in a country like Bangladesh. It is not uncommon that certain pressure groups always try to influence the regulatory bodies and get away with the crimes of polluting beyond the level set by the DoE. That is why we still see unfit vehicles on the road, or brick kilns operating in full capacity across the country. At times, it becomes a source of rent seeking.

The other instrument to curb air pollution is economic incentives through various fiscal measures, such as emission tax and liability payment for pollution. This approach makes the polluting entities pay for their actions. Interest subsidies on loans for purchasing emission treatment plants is also a market incentive for pollution control. The government earning from emission taxes can be used for the social protection of the poor and other social development activities. Here, the implementation-related problems arise again. In Bangladesh, in many cases, there are difficulties in getting relevant and correct information to determine tax on a polluting industry. Particularly, information on the actual income or profit is not often reported. Therefore, the tax imposed on a polluter may be lower than the actual cost created through harming the environment.

Both methods are difficult to be applied properly in Bangladesh due to weak governance and lack of resources. Moreover, how these will impact the poor and low-income groups should also be taken into consideration. Strict implementation of the environmental policies may reduce livelihood opportunities of the poor, who rely on nature to make a living. Therefore, while implementing environmental measures, fiscal policies must be crafted to provide social protection to the poor.

The economic cost of air pollution is also very high. By increasing health costs and reducing people's ability to work, it affects the total economic output and GDP growth.

During the Covid-19 lockdowns in the last two years, there was some reduction in air pollution around the world. Closure of most physical economic activities, infrastructure construction, transportation, and educational institutions contributed to this change. However, as soon as world economies started opening up, pollution started to rise as well.

Appropriate policy measures and their effective implementation are necessary to address this challenge in a meaningful manner.

One way to control air pollution is to adopt the command-and-control approach, through which a government directly controls man-made pollution. In Bangladesh, this method has been adopted through various policies setting caps for pollution levels for the industries. For example, Bangladesh Environment Conservation Act, 1995 was an important move towards environmental protection as it established the Department of Environment (DoE), which is empowered to take action against a polluting entity. This law was

## Let's show zero tolerance for pollution



RMG NOTES

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MOSTAFIZ UDDIN

ENVIRONMENTAL issues related to the ready-made garment (RMG) sector of Bangladesh appear to have taken a back seat in recent years. Much more focus has been placed upon social aspects, including factory safety, workers' welfare, and pay and employment conditions in the RMG factories. The reason for the shift away from the environment and pollution as a talking point is largely because of the progress the industry has made in reducing its environmental burden.

Around a decade ago, Greenpeace, an international direct-action group, began a campaign against the use of potentially hazardous chemicals in fashion supply chains. Many chemicals are used in supply chains, particularly in the dyeing and finishing of clothing. Greenpeace's campaign focused on reducing the amount of hazardous chemicals used, and put the spotlight on how dyeing and finishing units dispose of their effluent into the environment.

The campaign had a huge impact. It forced fashion retailers—our customers—to look closely at their supply chains and this, in turn, made garment makers as well as dyeing and finishing units become far more compliant regarding this issue.

The net result, a decade later, is a cleaner industry with a reputation for environmental management. Bangladeshi RMG manufacturers have been leaders in this area.

Why am I writing about this? That's because a recent news report captured my attention. The story, which was on pollution linked to textile dyeing factories in Dhaka's Shyampur area, illustrates perfectly why we can never be complacent when it comes to pollution.

According to the report, dyeing factories in Shyampur have been polluting the Buriganga River by releasing raw liquid waste directly into its water. Experts warn that if this is not addressed in time, the local residents could suffer from serious health hazards. We also know from experience that textile pollutants can harm aquatic animals and damage ecosystems.

planning and coordination between the authorities and the local industry had led to this situation.

There are calls for a common effluent treatment plant (ETP) for dyeing factories in Shyampur as an absolute emergency to save the river from pollution. But the factory owners are also said to be complaining that the Dhaka Water Supply and Sewerage Authority (Wasa) is not providing land for such a plant. From the story, it seems none of the various government authorities involved is taking responsibility for the situation.

We cannot afford to have a situation like that regarding an issue as important as environmental pollution. How much would it cost to set up a central ETP in the area? And why is it not happening immediately?

Bangladesh will always be under the spotlight where sustainability issues are concerned. We have never managed to shake off the "baggage" of the past on these issues, and it would only take a few international media outlets to pick up this issue to cause our industry huge problems. Reputation is hard-earned, but can be lost in the blink of an eye. RMG exports account for more than 80 percent of all export revenues in Bangladesh. This vital revenue source cannot be put at risk simply because of disagreements over whose responsibility it is to implement proper technology in a particular locality. This may be a local issue, but it could have major international implications given that our customers do not just ask for proper environmental oversight in their supply chains, but they absolutely insist on it as a prerequisite for doing business. This is the industry in which we operate.

The powers that be need to sit down and sort out these issues with urgency. If there are questions over whose responsibility it is to install ETPs, they need to be resolved. We all need to know our roles, and we all need to understand as individuals that our livelihoods depend on getting these things right. Bangladesh's RMG sector has come too far to start going backwards now where the environment is concerned.



▲ **Being negligent about polluting our rivers with untreated effluent will make things only worse for our RMG industry in the long run.**

PHOTO: ANISUR RAHMAN

Reportedly, the river is already in a poor state. The researchers who carried out the study claim that a total of 80-100 dyeing factories in Shyampur are releasing their liquid waste chemicals into the river.

So, what is being done to tackle this issue?

Our RMG sector has taken giant strides on environmental issues in recent years. This progress cannot be allowed to be undone by a lack of proper regulatory oversight or investment in equipment and technology to effectively treat effluent before it is released into our water bodies. Sophisticated technology to treat waste water has existed for decades. Why is it not being used in this scenario? Why are we letting our rivers be poisoned, threatening local lives and potentially soiling our hard-won international reputation?

Reading the news report further, the impression I got was that a lack of