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PHOTO: STAR

Ingenious indigenous innovation

Kabuljan Begum’s eco-friendly oven makes waves across Rajshahi

ANWAR ALLI, Rajshahi

Fourteen years ago, Kabuljan Begum developed an environment-friendly oven to keep herself and her family safe from air pollution caused by open fire ovens.

Her solution has now become the go-to choice for hundreds of others in the rural areas of Rajshahi region, covering three districts of Rajshahi, Naogaon and Chapainawabganj.

From her remote village in Horidebpur in Rajshahi’s Tanore upazila, some 36 km off Rajshahi city, 55-year-old Kabuljan Begum visits village after village every week to make her ovens for others.

Officials of Bangladesh Resources Centre for Indigenous Knowledge (BARCIK) said according to their records of her activities since 2017, she has developed eight types of ovens and visited 85 villages to make over 5,000 ovens.

“Her oven is simple, cheap and it ensures a healthy kitchen,” said Amreto Kumar Sarker, a programme officer of BARCIK.

Its specialty lies in filtering carbon by using a chimney made with earth or cement and an earth-made perforated cap. The chimney and cap requires frequent cleaning, the official said.

According to WHO, 260 crore people across the globe use ordinary open fire ovens, which produce harmful black smoke that can cause pneumonia among children, heart diseases, asthma, and lung diseases, leading to death of some 40 lakh people worldwide.

During a recent visit to Kabuljan Begum’s Horidebpur village, this correspondent saw her returning from a business trip to a neighbouring village.

“I’ve never imagined that an oven can fetch me this much popularity,” Kabuljan said. “The families bless me when they sense how easily they can get rid of black smoke and dirt from ordinary ovens by switching to mine.”

The idea started its journey in 2008, when development workers took the concept of “Bandhu Chula” (environment-friendly oven) to her village. But back then, Kabuljan could not afford one for her family.

One day, she asked her husband to collect some clay and concrete pipes to build an oven and its chimney.

“The first oven cost me Tk 500. It worked really well. Then I re-developed it for my convenience,” she said.

Her oven burns with all types of firewood, straws and fallen tree-leaves. It causes no harm to the cook or anyone else in the house and lasts long, she said.

Witnessing her using the oven, neighbours started asking her to make some for them, and this is how started production on a broader scale.

Soon enough, she had covered, by foot, 250 households in her neighbourhood and made her ovens for them.

After that, words started spreading beyond her village. Her stature kept growing as her role in alleviating household air pollution drew the attention of the local administration, which led to her attending several local innovation fairs.

In 2014, she received the Joyeeta award for her efforts.

Assisted by BARCIK, she started visiting distant villages and indigenous communities since 2017.

So far, she has travelled to Paba, Tanore, Godagari, Mohonpur, Niamatpur, Nachol, Manda upazilas and even the slums of Rajshahi city in Sreerampur, and Namo Bhadra areas. Since 2009, Kabuljan has built some 10,000 ovens.

“Whoever calls me, I visit them. Sometimes, I

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WOMEN-FRIENDLY PUBLIC TRANSPORT IN DHAKA

Still a distant dream

TUHIN SHUBHRA ADHIKARY

Jumping on running buses, groping, verbal abuse, men taking up their seats. For the women of Dhaka city, commuting by bus has always been an ordeal, as they often have to endure all these just to get to their destination.

This lack of security and proper access to such a basic service, as buses are the primary mode of transport, has been a long-standing issue. In an effort to improve the situation, Bangladesh Road Transport Corporation (BRTC) launched a special bus service for women years ago, with 17 vehicles dedicated for them in the capital.

Although the service, which operates only in the morning and evening on 13 routes, has never been able to satisfy commuters, the initiative at least ensured a relatively safe and harassment-free ride.

But when the pandemic hit the country in March 2020, the state-run transport agency suspended the service.

“The entire transport system has to be gender responsive. Women using these services pay for them, and therefore, they are entitled to safety, security and dignity.”

FARAH KABIR
Country director of ActionAid

When the Covid restrictions were lifted, however, BRTC did not fully resume the operation, making women’s commutes as problematic as before.

Currently, only six such buses are operating across the city. A BRTC official said they are working on increasing the number gradually.

INTERNATIONAL WOMEN’S DAY



PERSISTING ISSUES

Women being harassed on buses

BRTC’s dedicated bus service for women still not fully operational

Only 6 operating in city at present

Buses don’t stop for boarding

Many conductors, helpers behave rudely with female passengers

Men take up handful of women’s seats

Meanwhile, for private buses, the situation is even worse. Though they have some dedicated seats for women, they remain mostly occupied by men.

As Bangladesh and the world at large celebrate International Women’s Day today, with the theme “Gender Equality Today for a Sustainable Tomorrow”, women-friendly public transport remains a distant dream in Dhaka.

Arwin Ahmad, a master’s student of Dhaka University, who often goes to classes from her residence in Chattogram Road by bus, told this newspaper that in many cases, buses are not willing to take female passengers.

“They [bus drivers], on many occasions don’t stop the bus, but rather force us to get on running buses, which is quite difficult for women,” she said.

Many conductors and helpers behave rudely with female passengers, she said,

adding that the handful of women’s seats seldom remain vacant, forcing many to stand throughout the journey.

Asked about the claims, Mahbubur Rahman, organising secretary of Dhaka Road Transport Owner Association, said although nine seats are dedicated for women and children in private buses, many men refuse to follow the rule.

In such cases, bus staffers, upon requests from female passengers, ask the men to vacate the seats, he said.

About rude behaviour of bus staffers, he said if anyone lodges a complaint, the association takes action against bus owners and workers in question.

Mozammel Hoque Chowdhury, secretary general of Jatri Kalyan Samity, however, said bus services in Dhaka city are not even male-friendly. “Transport services are a nightmare for women, as they have to face many types of

harassment,” he told The Daily Star yesterday. “On the occasion of women’s day, we urge the government to enhance services for women and make their journey hassle-free.”

Farah Kabir, country director of ActionAid, said policymakers have to keep in mind that women and girls have to go out for work and other activities, and so, public transport has to be woman-friendly.

“The entire transport system has to be gender responsive,” she told this newspaper. “Women using these services pay for them, and therefore, they are entitled to safety, security and dignity.”

“We need to make the regulatory system effective and consumer associations stronger to demand that women and girls do not face any discrimination on any form of public transport,” she added.

Health hazards stalk female tea workers

MINTU DESHWARA

Women tea workers not only play a vital role in their industry, they’re also the rocks of their family’s economic fortunes. But for all the work that they do, they are plagued by malnutrition, stigma, financial uncertainty, lack of awareness regarding gender issues and lack of hygiene.

To add to this is the persistent culture of early marriage and the pressure to have more children. As a result, both the workers and their children are left with various physical complications, including malnutrition and anaemia.

Kajol Roy works at a tea garden at Rajnagar upazila of Moulvibazar. “I have four daughters but no sons. My husband keeps rebuking me over this, as if it’s my fault,” she told this correspondent recently.

According to a survey conducted by Unicef and Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics (BBS) on tea gardens across Sylhet division, 46 percent of adolescents in the gardens are victims of child marriage, while motherhood before the age of 18 stands at 22.2 percent. The survey was published in late 2019.

Meanwhile, another survey, funded by UNFPA and conducted by the National Institute for Health Development and Research, Centre for Injury Prevention and Research (CIPRB) and Ministry of Health, revealed that 15 percent of female tea workers have been diagnosed with cervical cancer.

The survey was conducted among 3,000 female workers of 10 gardens in Moulvibazar, of whom 519 tested positive for incurable cervical cancer, said CIPRB District Coordinator Altafur Rahman.

Nighat Sadia, director of Usha, a volunteer organisation working with teenagers and children in the tea gardens in Sylhet, said, “Child marriage is the norm for most tea workers. They’re married off at an early age due to lack of security, poverty, prejudice and illiteracy. As a result, they become mothers at a young age, which throws both mother and child into malnutrition as there’s a lack of nutritious food due to their low incomes.”

Tea worker Mira Hazra (40) has three daughters and one son. “Every time during pregnancy, the midwife gave me two iron tablets and advised a diet consisting of vegetables, eggs, fish and meat. But

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For all their significant contributions to the tea industry, female tea workers suffer from malnutrition and a host of other diseases, while child marriage and early childbirth refuse to leave them alone.

PHOTO: STAR