

Time to change the story of coastal women’s struggles



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M AKSURA lived in Shyamnagar, in the coastal areas of Bangladesh. She graduated against all odds and dreamed of a future where she could work and apply her knowledge in real life. But she was unable to find a suitable opportunity, and instead was married off to a disabled and slightly less educated man. The man owned a small shrimp firm, but his business was being threatened by newer, wealthier entrants. So she wished to shape a better life for herself and her family. But everyone was awaiting news of her pregnancy. The pressure from her family and society kept mounting, and soon after her wedding, she decided to give in and have a baby. Amid financial duress and a dwindling career, she conceived her first child at 28. As fate would have it, three months into her pregnancy, she lost the baby. As her husband wrestled with diminishing business opportunities in the heavily salinised area, Maksura found herself facing all sorts of social stigma. She decided to try for a child again; her world in tatters, Maksura knew that a baby was her ticket to peace and stability in the family. Unfortunately, this was not to be, as four months into her pregnancy, she miscarried again. Maksura met with an NGO medical practitioner who instantly advised her some medication, food and a change of her source of drinking water, and to opt for treated water found a little further from her home by Friendship’s water treatment plant. Maksura was finally able to give birth to a healthy baby. Maksura’s story reveals the research by the icddr, which found that women residing within 20km of the coastline and seven metres above sea level were 1.3 times more likely to suffer miscarriage than

women residing further inland. According to the Soil Resource Development Institute (SRDI), salinity has been a problem since the early 1970s, and has increased around 26 percent in the last 35 years. However, salinity is not the only issue ailing Bangladeshi women’s health and lives in general. Women have assumed familial



▲ In Bangladesh, the impacts of climate change are felt more by women than men.

FILE PHOTO: REUTERS

search of jobs, women stay behind to look after the children and the elderly. They find themselves in charge of bringing wood and dry leaves for fire, water for household needs, and food for their families. If it is a traditionally woman-led household, these roles are even starker. Even as a standalone job, water collection is difficult. If water collection points are

actually own very little land. Whether or not these ventures bring them an earning opportunity, they do help them provide a source of food and nutrition for their families. According to data obtained from FAO in 2018, 11 percent of small-scale fishers and almost half of all aquaculture workers around the world are women, and climate change could harm all of these women’s livelihoods. Women often miss out on critical weather safety from disasters. According to the Climate Change Profile Bangladesh (2018), in times of climate-related disasters (which are likely to happen more often in the future), women are hit harder than men. In the past, cyclones and floods have been associated with death rates for women five times higher than for men. Cyclone Gorky in 1991 had a death ratio of 14:1 with the heavier side being that of females, according to a study by the World Bank. The Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) recognises that one of the issues that can really exacerbate climate-related hazards is gender inequality, as workload, occupational hazards, psychological, physiological, and emotional stress, and mortality will all rise for women and girls. Even as the world tries to reduce carbon emissions, direct measures to ensure support for women are missing. Laws, policies, and practical interpretation are very important to empower women. Most of the issues are cross-cutting, and to be able to sift and work through them, extensive gender-disaggregated data on the more marginalised and vulnerable groups of women, including girl children and the very old, is needed. Climate change is not a gender-neutral concept, nor are the effects of it more lenient towards the disadvantaged female. However, the personal realisation for each one of us is that stories like Maksura’s should not be repeated, and that each one of us should genuinely and positively intend to prepare a stronger future generation that does not fall victim to age-old prejudicial norms and practices.

The flip side of economic growth



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W ITH the rising prices of essentials in Bangladesh, people with fixed income are struggling to make ends meet. But some of the ministers are in denial, sometimes referring to the increasing income levels of the people in the country as the cause behind the increased living costs. This argument seems logical if we note that our per capita income increased by 11 percent in the 2020-2021 fiscal year and now stands at USD 2,591. Additionally, we achieved 6.9 percent growth in GDP. Furthermore, by 2041, the government expects the country’s economic volume to grow to USD 2.5 trillion and the per capita income to cross USD 12,000. There is a flip side to it: The benefits of economic growth have mostly trickled up, rather than trickle down. The World Inequality Report 2022 revealed that only one percent of Bangladesh’s population held 16.3 percent of the total national income in 2021, and the bottom half held 17.1

percent. And overall, 44 percent of our total national income is acquired by only 10 percent of the population. We find misery within rampant economic growth, but policymakers globally show persistent fascination towards growth. The obsession with economic growth echoes John Maynard Keynes’s speculation in the 1930 essay titled “Economic Possibilities for Our Grandchildren,” which says capital investment and technological progress would create a society where people would not have to work more than 15 hours a week. However, the global situation is far from what Keynes predicted 92 years ago. Government policies are focused too narrowly on the growth trajectory, ignoring many other ominous signs: rising inequality, corruption, soaring inflation, youth unemployment, regional disparity, etc. Considering the paradox, one could ask: If the economy is growing, why are people suffering? A straightforward answer to this: economic growth, as measured by GDP, does not essentially lead to common well-being. Since the Bretton Woods conference in 1944, economic growth in GDP has dictated how countries conduct their affairs and priorities worldwide. Economic growth often means more people at work and more businesses in operation.

One could say that the world leaders are obsessed with economic growth measured by the GDP. However, there is no consideration of whether that growth is inclusive and “good for all.”

Moreover, economic growth is expected to provide people with opportunities to move up the ladder and perform to their full potential. The height of this tendency was revealed by Irish Prime Minister Bertie Ahern in 2006, when he explained the rising inflation saying, “The boom times are getting even boomier.” Similarly, some Bangladeshi ministers associate the rising living costs in the country with the increasing purchasing power of the population, and focus more on economic growth. One could say that the world leaders are obsessed with economic growth measured by the GDP. However, there is no consideration of whether that growth is “good for all.” For example, due to the traffic congestion, we lose a portion of our workday and efficiency. We could calculate the loss it incurs to the overall economic growth. But ironically, traffic congestion also causes GDP to increase, since people must buy all that gasoline. Additionally, traffic congestion’s aggregate negative consequences are not directly visible, as pollution and frustration do not usually show up in data representing economic growth. Many economists would agree that economic growth as measured by GDP is not directly connected with social and environmental outcomes that determine our well-being and the planet’s sustainability.

To move away from the world’s growth model and reliance on GDP as the measure of development is challenging. It would practically mean that we significantly reduce buying products. As the demand for commodities is reduced, production will decrease, and natural resource extraction will be slowed. Eventually, our planet’s sustainability will improve. But the growth supporters fear that in such an economy, many people would find no work. Nonetheless, they ignore that if we could decouple income from labour by introducing a basic income for all, it would encourage people to become entrepreneurs and try alternative livelihood options. The government could raise taxes on the rich to finance a basic income scheme. Furthermore, if growth becomes less imperative, policymakers could prioritise distributional policies more than we have today by providing better education, healthcare, or job opportunities for the disadvantaged segment, without worrying about increased government spending. One could argue that we still do not have globally applicable financial, political, and social redesign models to build an economy that will thrive even if it does not grow. But it is an existential question, and we need to start raising our voice at mainstream policy debates.

QUOTE
Quote

PABLO CASALS

(1876 - 1973)
Spanish musician

The love of one’s country is a splendid thing. But why should love stop at the border?

CROSSWORD BY THOMAS JOSEPH

ACROSS

31 Lifeboat need mother
32 Shoulder 11 Wallet bills
5 “Moby-Dick” captain 15 Stretches out
9 Syrup choice 19 Has lunch
10 Director 20 Had lunch
Almodovar 22 Clarinet’s kin
12 “The Tempest” 23 Artist Jean
sprite 24 Fishes with
13 Hawke of films a net
14 Speaks like a 25 Roman poet
Southerner 26 Made wolf
16 Ram’s mate sounds
17 Goes bad 27 Coves
18 Oysters’ prizes 28 Do some
21 Summer, modeling
along the Seine 30 Washroom
22 Makes sight
speeches 33 Conceal
23 Ease up 35 Hamm of
24 Tosses soccer
26 Stylish 36 Passport,
29 Drive license, etc.
30 Skeleton part 9 Mexican

DOWN

1 Chatty bird
2 Heroin, for one
3 Large amounts
4 Spill the beans
5 King Kong, for one
6 – up (agitated)
7 Stick
8 Free-for-alls
9 Mexican

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YESTERDAY’S ANSWERS

C	I	A	O	S	H	A	M	S
A	C	C	R	A	P	U	P	I
R	A	T	O	N	A	T	O	N
B	R	O	T	E	N	L	I	E
S	U	N	D	A	Y	P	L	O
S	E	E	R	E	A	S	O	N
S	K	I	S	E	A	S	O	N
S	E	A	M	A	L	T	H	E
C	A	R	P	R	O	S	E	C
A	L	A	M	O	S	A	U	D
M	U	T	E	S	S	I	R	E
S	P	E	N	T	R	E	D	S

BEETLE BAILEY BY MORT WALKER

BABY BLUES BY KIRKMAN & SCOTT