

Help struggling countries reach vaccination targets

PM’s timely call to development partners

PRIME Minister Sheikh Hasina has made a timely call to our development partners to work together and increase their contributions including vaccine supplies to Covax Advance Market Commitment (AMC) so that all countries can reach their vaccination targets. She said that Covid vaccines should be considered a global public good and the international community should give special attention and support to countries that are still lagging behind in achieving their targets. The PM also expressed her will to work with GAVI and Covax AMC to ensure vaccine equity.

While the World Health Organization has set a target to vaccinate 70 percent of the global population with double dose by mid-2022, there are still many countries who are far from reaching this milestone. Comparatively, Bangladesh’s Covid-19 vaccination campaign has been quite successful. So far, we’ve vaccinated 75.25 percent of the population with one vaccine dose and 67.37 percent with two doses, while 9.10 percent of eligible individuals have already got a third dose (as of April 6).

Since the government started its vaccination campaign in February 2021, it faced some major hurdles due to unavailability of vaccines and consequent disruptions in the drive. However, despite initial struggles, it recovered from the challenges by procuring vaccines from several sources. Apart from the regular campaign, the government also conducted some special drives to bring the majority of eligible individuals under its vaccination coverage. Bangladesh may be the only country in the world that has administered one crore doses of vaccines in a single day. The government’s achievement in this regard is quite praiseworthy, and our longstanding partnership with GAVI Alliance and Covax has played a crucial role in this. Moreover, our vaccine cold chain was pretty efficient while the general people have also been quite enthusiastic about getting the jabs.

However, countries that are still falling behind the WHO-set inoculation target must be assisted by the international community. If the able nations increase their contributions to the Covax and GAVI, those in need of vaccines can really benefit from it. We think Bangladesh can also work with the international vaccine alliances and play its part to ensure vaccine equity, as our prime minister has said. Bangladesh has already become a role model in Covid-19 vaccination and can definitely assist other countries with its knowledge and skills to run largescale vaccination campaigns. It can also produce vaccines with assistance from the international community which will surely help fight the pandemic on a global scale.

In simple words, only greater international cooperation and collaboration can help all nations reach their inoculation targets, thereby defeating the pandemic together.

Sanity must prevail as Ukraine war escalates food prices

Ominous presence of hunger around the world

THE Russia-Ukraine war has already resulted in an abnormal escalation in global food prices, especially of staple grains and vegetable oils, which the UN’s Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) has confirmed as being all-time high. The UN now fears the risk of a global hunger crisis.

The conflict has sent prices of oil, gas and some other essential commodities spiralling out of control across the world, including in Bangladesh, causing inflation to rise further globally. The invasion has hugely disrupted the seasonal agricultural activities, production and shipment of food grains from the region as their ports remain closed since war broke out. Global food commodity prices went up by 12.6 percent in March to reach the highest levels ever because of the war. How high it will climb further if the war does not end any time soon is a question now worrying the experts. As Russia and Ukraine together account for around 30 percent and 20 percent of global wheat and maize exports respectively, it is doubly important that ports are given permission to operate and ships allowed to carry food grains on humanitarian grounds.

In an attempt to contain the situation, the Ukrainian authorities approached the European Union to provide aid to its farmers, and the European Commission has been asked to coordinate the delivery of fuel, seeds, fertilisers and agricultural machines to the country. Interestingly, in response to the rising global price of essential commodities because of the invasion of Ukraine and the imperative of export of food items, President Putin said his country would act prudently with supplies abroad, but monitor such exports to countries that are clearly hostile towards Russia.

At this stage, the possibility of famine must not be taken lightly by the world leaders, especially the Russian leadership. Hunger is conspicuously prevalent in many parts of the world where people are engaged in battles for survival on a daily basis, despite the spectre of climate catastrophe, flash-floods and drought hanging over their heads. In the food-deficient areas, people are breaking their backs to arrange for some decent meals for their family members, therefore, the new crisis is a burden that may prove too much for them. Russia being a superpower should cooperate with the world community in preventing the global food crisis going from bad to worse. Other world leaders should also step up and take measures to prevent such a terrifying scenario.

Draft mass media employees bill: Towards stricter control?



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THE draft Mass Media Employees (Services Conditions) Bill, placed in parliament on April 1, 2022, is a long-overdue initiative. Its stated objective and scope include relations between media employers and employees as well as dispute resolution, terms of employment including minimum salary, and legal protection of employees including work environment.

The draft contains a series of provisions intended to address some longstanding concerns of media professionals and stakeholders. For instance, the provisions for mandatory issuance of appointment letter, photo ID, and service book, fixation of minimum salary, benefits for in-service death, retirement, retrenchment, termination and dismissal, paid maternity leave, contributory provident fund (CPF), sick leave, rest and recreation leave, medical allowance, employees welfare association (EWA), etc.—all are steps in the right direction. In many cases, however, there is scope for modifications so it can serve the objective better.

On the other hand, there are numerous seemingly discriminatory provisions that need closer scrutiny. The draft provides a minimum of 48 hours of work a week, whereas in other comparable countries, like India, it is no more than 144 hours in any period of four consecutive weeks. The provision for overtime has been made without specifying any limit or the basis of calculation of overtime payment. A Trustee Board of CPF will be formed with an equal number of representatives from employers and employees, whereas governance and management of such funds should be exclusively within the jurisdiction of employees.

The bill provides that a woman-friendly work environment shall be created, but it is left for the rules to be framed to determine how it will be ensured. It does not make any provision to ensure that work conditions, including salaries and benefits, are not discriminatory depending on gender, social, religious, ethnic, disability or any other marker of identity.

The retrenchment provision on the ground of excess staff can be arbitrarily used in the absence of specific criteria determining the credibility of said ground. The provision for dismissal on the ground of physical or mental infirmity based on a registered doctor’s certificate can also be misused in the absence of a provision for veracity check. In case of termination of contract, no scope has been made for due process including right of self-defence.

Owners and employees—“we” vs “they”
A blanket provision has been made that 10 or more employees can be wholesale terminated to maintain “overall security

and peace and order”, which can be widely and variedly interpreted. This may have a demoralising and intimidating effect on employees and may render the EWA practically dysfunctional.

A key stated objective of the bill is to manage the relationship between “mass media owners” (malik) and employees and redress conflict between the two sides. The term malik represents



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an outdated and counterproductive “we versus they” approach to the relationship between employers and employees which breeds a mutual threat perception—whereas, corporate good practice features a “spirit of ownership” mainstreamed across an organisation including employees of all levels and employers/investors. The bill can play a catalytic role in this mindset shift, and change the narrative accordingly.

Risk of further government control
The draft represents an underlying agenda for legalising unwarranted governmental and administrative control of the mass media. The government has near-exclusive jurisdiction over the formation and composition of the Wage Board. International good practice shows wage boards composed of an equal number of representatives from employers and employees as well as a few independent individuals, whereas the draft bill provides only one employers’ representative, three from employees, and two government officials. Moreover, all appointments including representatives of employers and employees and the unspecified number of additional members are left to the government’s discretion. The question is why the wage board of a private-sector industry like the media should be so much under government control, unless the underlying purpose

is to ensure stricter and more targeted control of the media. While the draft obliges employers to pay at wage board rates, it does not make any provision for actions to be taken for non-compliance. This is important against a track record that only about a dozen out of the 150-plus media houses comply, and no action is taken for non-compliance. Unless rigorously enforced, the vast majority of the employees will continue to be deprived, while the non-compliant entities will carry on enjoying undue benefits of non-compliance protected by the inaction of the authorities, and the compliant ones will be further disadvantaged.

For dispute resolution, an unwarranted idea of government-appointed Mass Media Court and Appeal Court has been invented, which appears to represent a design to further strangle the media. Even for dispute resolution through bilateral negotiations, an unwarranted provision has been made to “report to the government”. These are incompatible with international standards. The most relevant good practice is to repose this responsibility in the wage board like the usual industrial dispute investigation and settlement—provided, of course, that the wage board is truly independent. In exceptional situations, if appeal becomes unavoidable, a Tribunal consisting of a judge of the High Court or above may be provided for.

Work environment and legal protection
Another crucial objective of the bill—to ensure a conducive work environment and legal protection of media professionals—has been left totally untouched. Given that the media is expected to play a watchdog role for democracy and people’s right to information, the employers and the government should consider any threat to the working conditions, security and safety of the employees as a threat to themselves. Accordingly, there should be specific provisions for a safe and enabling environment for the employees’ professional work, including protection mechanisms and protocols to prevent and address risks such as surveillance, intimidation, attacks, arbitrary arrests, etc.

The bill should provide that media employees, particularly journalists, will have unrestricted access to all sources of information and the right to investigate as needed, and without impediment, as part of their professional duties.

The draft bill needs to be thoroughly overhauled so that it fits its stated purposes. It should be done through a participatory process involving media employees of various categories, employers, editors, media specialists and other stakeholders. The parliamentary committee has the jurisdiction and responsibility to take the lead. The media employers and employees should take their own initiatives proactively. Any failure to do so will be self-defeating.

Girl, boy, person—let everyone blossom



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“Is it a boy or a girl?”

FUNNY how this question often preempts concern about the health of mother and baby. Why are we so obsessed with a baby’s gender? From the baby’s earliest days, we seek to reinforce gender stereotypes that say nothing about the actual biological differences between males and females, but that burden the tiniest baby with expectations that can hamper its hope for a positive future. Adults constantly tell us what it means to be a boy or girl and ensure that we conform to gender stereotypes. But those stereotypes are not only annoying but genuinely harmful.

We tell girls to be gentle, soft, and to speak quietly. We encourage boys to be loud and aggressive, but not to cry. We teach girls that housework is their responsibility and boys to shun it as unmanly.

As children grow into youth, they often internalise these stereotyped gender roles, perhaps avoiding activities that they might otherwise enjoy or excel at. Boys who have been taught to suppress their feelings and to resolve disputes through violence may grow into abusive adults. Women bear full burden for household responsibilities even when

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they have a paid job, while fathers often have little connection with their children.

I worry when I meet very gentle, soft-spoken women. Will they be able to defend themselves if they are in an abusive situation with a boss or husband? If they have good ideas, will they be able to express themselves firmly and confidently enough that others will pay attention, rather than simply talk over them? I also worry when boys cannot express their emotions or know no way of resolving conflict other than yelling and lashing out.

One young woman I met is one of a family of girls. Her father, desperate for a boy, gave her a boy’s name, and for many years she was encouraged to behave in stereotypically masculine ways. But then when she reached late adolescence, her family attempted to rein in those tendencies and push her to be a conventional girl. Why does she wear her hair short? Why is she so assertive? Rather than celebrate and encourage her, her family tries to mould her into something different, something alien to her essence. She is a continual disappointment to her family both for not being a boy and for not being sufficiently feminine.

I see it too in the struggles of some children. Boys who wish to play at girls’ games, or who are gentle. Girls who want to play sports or have learned to be assertive (which, when girls do it, is known as being aggressive). Can a young woman wear her hair long and pursue a degree in engineering? Can a young man love dance and be attracted to girls? The constant pulls to fit the societally constructed roles for females and males

can be exhausting and degrading. What about letting people just be who they are?

Part of what makes our world so interesting is the great variety in human behaviour. People do not always conform to expectations. They splash out in new fields and new ways, setting new trends or simply joyously or stubbornly rebelling against the norms. They expand the meaning of being male or female, or even of being human. How boring the world would be if we all just mindlessly did as we are told and never challenged authority!

Also, with so many problems that we need to address—heck, just flip through the pages of today’s newspaper and you’ll see an almost endless array—why are we wasting time with trying to force people to be what they’re not? Surely people would have more creativity and energy to do good in the world if they were not spending so much time and effort trying to fit themselves into a mould.

It can be hard to accept the ways in which we contribute to the furthering of harmful gender stereotypes. Perhaps it is time to engage in some introspection: how often do we encourage young girls to be pretty and gentle, and boys to be aggressive? Could we do better by the young people around us? Sometimes it only takes one or two people encouraging a child or youth to be comfortable and confident as they are, regardless of whether they are male or female, for the young person to bloom. And if enough of us fight against gender stereotypes, real change is possible.