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A platform for the systematically abused

It's high time we started addressing the plight of female migrant workers

IT is an unfortunate truth that female migrant workers are some of the most vulnerable people in Bangladesh, systematically subjected to harassment and abuse by recruiters and traffickers in the country, and mistreatment and violence by their employers overseas. According to the International Organization for Migration (IOM), 70 percent of female migrant workers are abused and beaten by their employers, with their mobility restricted and wages withheld. We are all too aware of the horrific stories of trafficking where women and girls, who dare to dream of a better life for themselves and their families, are tricked by unscrupulous recruiting agents and brokers into modern-day slavery. And even those who make it abroad through formal channels are left in vulnerable conditions, without anyone to register their complaints or protect their rights.

Despite the alarming plight of women migrant workers, there seems to be no sustained effort by the government to bring about systemic changes for safer workplaces abroad. In an overwhelming majority of cases, Bangladeshi embassies in the host countries are unable or unwilling to address the human rights abuse of our female migrants in a timely and effective manner, leaving them helpless in a foreign land where they don't know anyone or even its language. When asked about the syndicates that are preying on economically and socially vulnerable women and girls, the relevant ministries' stock response is to blame the victims and their "greed."

Given these dire circumstances, we welcome the initiative to form a national alliance on women migrant workers. The Alliance for Women Migrant Voices (AWMV), consisting currently of 22 members—seven national level and 15 local NGOs—aims to strengthen networking among women's rights organisations for taking a proactive role in ensuring safe female migration and addressing issues of discrimination and violence in their workplaces. It will also advocate for new migrant-friendly laws and policies and build the capacity to voice their needs and demands.

The alliance, we hope, will work closely with women and girls to raise awareness about the dangers of going through informal recruitment channels, build their skills so that they can get better-paid and more secure jobs abroad, and ensure that once in the host country, they have a communication channel with the Bangladesh embassy in the concerned country as well as with an alliance member. It also must put pressure on relevant stakeholders to prioritise women workers' rights over remittances.

We urge the government to utilise the network to identify the key challenges faced by female migrants and actually implement the recommendations put forward by the alliance in the future. It is, after all, in everyone's best interests to ensure a safe future for our remittance warriors.

Are we to face a global food crisis now?

Govt must work on stabilising food prices immediately

THE United Nations, only some days ago, had solemnly hinted at a worldwide food crisis following Russia's invasion of Ukraine, and now the World Bank has spelled it out distinctly that the world is facing a "human catastrophe" from soaring food and energy prices because of the war.

It is alarming that food prices all over the world, including in Bangladesh, are on the rise. It's a major cause for concern for the governments in most countries because, at the end of the day, people need food on their plates. The World Bank president predicts that the Ukraine war would eventually push hundreds of millions of people into poverty, unless it can be stopped immediately.

Even setting aside the prediction that there could be a 37 percent jump in food prices, people in Bangladesh will still have to deal with the recently increased (and increasing) prices of essentials amid their struggle to recover from the pandemic. Already, a report by the Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) late last year stated that, in 2020, there were at least 52 million Bangladeshis without food security, 2.4 percent higher than the number in 2018. It seems even the basic need of affordable nutrition is to escape further and further from our grasp, unless world leaders act now.

It will be difficult for most developing countries to keep the wheels of their economies running in the midst of the food and energy crisis caused by the Ukraine war. Additionally, the fallout of the war has left as many as 60 percent of the poorest countries either in debt distress or at high risks of being in debt distress.

While the World Bank has suggested a release of food from large global stockpiles to deal with the crisis, Bangladesh must also work on reducing its dependency on imports as well as take urgent and responsible policies to address inflationary pressures in the economy. Meanwhile, it should purchase necessary commodities from the global market quickly and at competitive prices and distribute these items at reduced prices through open market sales to reduce the burden on ordinary people. Market monitoring is crucial to ensure that unscrupulous businessmen do not hike prices of imported items further, as has been the case for soy bean oil.

Bangladeshis have already been burdened for months by increasing prices of diesel, edible oil and grains, among other things. A global food crisis may be the nail in the coffin. We believe those at the helm of the Russia-Ukraine war must be responsive to the plight of millions of poor families and allow shipment of food grains from Ukrainian and other Russian ports to stave off the imminent global crisis.

The playbook of student politics needs an overhaul



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MANZOOR AHMED

THE tragedy of two innocent by-standers' lives squandered, hundreds injured, shops damaged and burnt, and business worth crores of taka during the festival season lost from a night and a whole day of pitched battle between Dhaka College students and shop owners in the New Market area once again raise the question: Why has this kind of shameful spectacle been allowed to go on? Can nothing be done about it?

Media reports suggest that a dispute between two staff members of fast food stalls led to a brawl, but it escalated when one of them got some student leaders from Dhaka College to come in a group to his support. The students were chased away by shop owners and workers. However, the students came back reinforcing their number and equipping themselves with rods, sticks and machetes. Police intervened with tear gas—it is alleged after some delay—to bring the night battle to an end.

But then, the next morning, students came back to demonstrate, complaining about rude behaviour of the shop owners and their staff to students and customers. The shop owners, in response, rallied to protest *chandabazi* (extortion) and special favours demanded by "student leaders" as well as local political hacks. Again, throwing of bricks and chase and counter-chase followed. Police eventually restored calm after several hours.

The two unfortunate by-standers—Nahid Mia, a deliveryman of a computer shop, and Morsalin, a small shopkeeper—were caught in the battle. Nahid had gotten married seven months ago. Morsalin, the only bread-earner in his family, had two young children. A social media video showed incredible cruelty—Nahid lying motionless on the street face down while a helmet-wearing "student" struck him with a machete.

The media reports suggested and the director general of an education department mentioned that "third parties" had instigated the trouble. Police also said they were proceeding with investigation following this line of argument. Who could be the third parties? Apparently, a local political mini-leader has taken over the extortion ring, and many deprived ones are aggrieved, including some of the "student leaders," as speculated by the media.

An uneasy calm has returned, and the shops have reopened. Cases have been filed over the deaths, injuries, arson and use of explosives, naming over 1,200 unknown perpetrators, with only around two dozen mentioned by name. Perhaps a few will be actually identified and punished, and a few students may even be expelled from the college. This may again spark protests and demonstrations. The uneasy accommodation of extortion and control

will continue, until another incident escalates into violence with one or another aggrieved party reacting too strongly. Two lives lost and the families' tragedy cannot be redeemed.

Should it not be asked how these kinds of mayhem keep happening, and why these cannot be stopped? How is it that there is so often an adversarial interaction between the "town" and the "gown"? With

outlet for cultural, social and even political activities in an orderly way, is another consequence.

The "student politics" we see today in institutions as appendages of political parties, overwhelmingly dominated by the party in power, is a distorted and destructive version of what it is meant to be. It is a tragic irony that student politics has lost its way, especially since



FILE PHOTO: PRABIR DAS

any dispute between a customer and a small shop or food-stall owner, or a bus conductor and a passenger, students find it necessary to react aggressively as a group and take law into their own hands. What about an institutional code of conduct for students, what ethics and values they acquire in their education, and what do they learn from their teachers? Do students know that in a public institution like Dhaka College or any public university, the bulk of the cost of their education is borne by the taxpayers, the citizens, and that the students owe a debt to society? Should a student of a higher educational institution not be expected to live by a degree of civility in their interaction with others? It is, of course, unfair to blame only the students for the lack of these qualities, or for what happened around Dhaka College, and what may very well happen again.

There is no doubt that the "third party" instigation and the control and extortion rings are ingredients in the mess. But this is not a secret. Should this continue to be acceptable? Should the underlying causes—the nature of student politics today and the larger political culture that allows and encourages these to flourish—not be re-examined?

What has happened in the New Market area is not a rare and isolated situation; it is of a piece with similar misconduct of some students, mafia-like behaviour of some student leaders, and bizarre ways of exercising control and power by them. The loss of control of residential halls at universities by the respective administrations is an outcome. Not holding student union elections for over three decades in universities and colleges, which would have allowed students a normal

restoration of democracy in 1990. The movement against the military-backed autocratic rule was the last hurrah of real student politics. The Shahbagh movement of 2013 and the recent road safety campaign are only infrequent reminders of the glorious tradition.

In 2010, as the new national education policy was being formulated, five most distinguished and respected educationists of Bangladesh expressed their concern about the state of our education and the need for restoring the environment for academic pursuits in educational institutions. The first of their nine recommendations was: "In order to keep students and youth away from mal-politics and maintain the academic environment on campus, direct and indirect links between Awami League and Chhatra League should be severed. At the same time, heads of all institutions and the local administration should be directed to strictly control all criminal and irregular activities by students and non-students, and the administration should be assured of full support from the government for this purpose. These measures are indispensable to restore the glorious tradition of student politics."

The signatories of the joint statement published in July 2010 were Prof Kabir Chowdhury, Prof Anisuzzaman, Prof Serajul Islam Chowdhury, Prof Zillur Rahman Siddiqui, and Prof Jamal Nazrul Islam. Only Prof Serajul Islam Chowdhury is with us today; the others are no more.

It is never too late to heed this wise counsel. Even from a realpolitik calculus of electoral politics, looking ahead to the parliamentary election in two years, such a move would be of benefit to the nation, and thus to the ruling party.

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PROJECT ■ SYNDICATE

Are the kids leaning right?



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MICHAEL BRONING

FOR decades, young people's leftward leanings were considered an iron law of politics. "If people are not conservative at 40, they have no head," Winston Churchill probably never said, "but if they are not liberal at 20, they have no heart." From John F Kennedy, Bill Clinton, and Tony Blair to Barack Obama and Jacinda Ardern, the leading lights of the left have regularly built political careers on the promise of youthful progressivism.

This pattern is so culturally ingrained that it is largely taken for granted. But electoral outcomes in many Western democracies have begun to suggest a very different dynamic. In the first round of the French presidential elections this month, Emmanuel Macron achieved only a narrow victory (27.85 percent) over the right-wing populist Marine Le Pen (23.15 percent). His success was based not so much on the fervour of the young as on the caution—and alarm—of older voters.

Post-election studies show that Macron carried only one age group comfortably: voters aged 65 and older. Le Pen outperformed him among those aged 25-49. And while the far-left candidate, Jean-Luc Melenchon, gained slightly more than one-third of the youth vote, Le Pen and the

other far-right candidate, Eric Zemmour, received the combined support of an unprecedented 22 percent of first-time voters. Among voters between the ages of 25 and 34, the far right's support increased to more than 35 percent. In France, it seems, the kids are not *d'accord*.

A similar trend appears to be unfolding across southern Europe, with young voters in Italy and Spain also tilting dramatically to the right. Vox, the Spanish right-wing populist party, has quickly emerged as the country's third largest political force, owing to the support it has received not so much from stereotypical stick-in-the-mud septuagenarians as from disgruntled, predominantly male, and less educated younger voters.

Recent polls in Sweden show "no clear differences in terms of age" among those supporting the far-right Sweden Democrats, meaning that younger voters are as likely as the older ones to cast a ballot for the party. While the Sweden Democrats have always had their share of mainly young male voters, their support among voters aged 18-24 increased from seven percent in 2014 to 11.8 percent in November 2021.

Similarly, in Germany's federal elections last year, the pro-business Free Democratic Party was the surprising top choice for first-time voters, even beating out the Greens. And in recent state elections in eastern Germany, the far-right Alternative für Deutschland gained unparalleled support from young people. In Saxony-Anhalt, the party gained the largest share of votes among the under-30s, as well as among those aged 30-44.

To be sure, this pattern of young people

turning away from the left is not universal—yet. In the UK and the US, younger voters remain committed to progressive parties overall. The Democrats are expected to keep a firm hold on younger voters in the US midterm elections this autumn. Whereas half of the voters aged 65 and older support the Republican candidate in their respective district, this level drops to a mere 29 percent among voters under 30.

Younger American voters' enduring alliance with the Democrats may be due in part to policies specifically tailored to their economic interests. Leading Democratic politicians have run on proposals to cancel student debt and pursue more robust forms of redistribution to reduce economic inequality.

But while progressive parties around the world should take note of this achievement, that doesn't mean they can ignore the lessons from recent elections elsewhere. Although progressives still generally outperform the right in many Western democracies, the momentum is shifting. Current trends are a stark reminder that success at the polls is not demographically predetermined.

Like their older counterparts, young voters will ultimately support the candidates who offer convincing solutions to the problems that are most pressing in their own lives. If progressive political movements fail to meet this basic condition, they may well lose their longstanding advantage among this electoral cohort. The notion that young people will always go for progressives will become a myth, rather than a reliable model.

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