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Home is where air pollution is

Lack of awareness and policy initiatives in this regard deeply worrying

HOME is where we feel most protected, away from all the dust, smog, noise, stench and traffic on the streets. But what if home is not the bastion of safety we thought it was? For years, experts have been trying to raise the alarm about how indoor air pollution can be as big a threat to our health as outdoor pollution. They now believe the level of indoor air pollutants can be two to five times higher than that outdoors. Dhaka, as the most air polluted city in the world, is naturally at risk, with a recent study on in-kitchen aerosol exposure identifying its indoor air quality as the worst in the world.

This may not come as a shock given how frequently we've been topping such charts, but it should worry us because of the total lack of concern among the authorities. Citizens, too, seem oblivious of the danger they're in—what causes indoor air pollution, how harmful it is, and what can be done to prevent it. In Bangladesh, more than 75 percent of households still reportedly use solid fuels for cooking. Prolonged exposure to this, coupled with lack of ventilation in mostly small kitchens, form a perfect recipe for disaster, especially for women and children who stay indoors for most of the time. Other factors include tobacco consumption, products for household cleaning and maintenance, and central heating or cooling systems.

It is because of long-term exposure to such indoor pollutants that a staggering 113,202 people die annually in Bangladesh, according to the WHO. Currently, our average life expectancy is being cut by 2.91 years—1.53 years of which by indoor air pollution. Among notable health complications caused by it are ischemic heart disease, lung cancer, lower respiratory infections, stroke, type 2 diabetes, adverse birth outcomes, etc.

With this level of threat staring us in the eye, not knowing about it or not taking steps to prevent it is a luxury we can ill-afford. The problem is how we perceive the safety of homes, schools, nurseries and other such indoor settings. Without sufficient awareness of what makes them unsafe from a health perspective, we're basically storing up problems for the future. All indoor settings should, therefore, must have a proper ventilation system. Even using mechanical ventilations like exhaust fans in kitchens can help mitigate harmful cooking emissions.

The government, on its part, should also step up efforts including by collecting extensive population-level data on the quality of indoor air, directing all city corporations and other relevant agencies to undertake proper measures, and running awareness campaigns. Also, since most families living in poor-quality housing may have no option but to make do with damp, under-ventilated environments, the government should come forward to assist them.

Will buses ever be women-friendly?

Govt must take stern action to stop sexual harassment there

WE'RE alarmed by a new transport survey that says that 63 percent of the women and girls using public transports in Dhaka had to face various forms of harassment including sexual harassment. While 47 percent of the surveyed complained of being sexually harassed, 61 percent said they were deliberately touched by bus staff while boarding or getting off buses. Some 25 percent of them said they experienced such touches at least three times in the last six months. Equally disturbingly, a significant percentage of those who had faced sexual or other forms of harassment in public transports later suffered from mental health issues.

These findings show that almost nothing has changed in terms of the safety of women and girls in public transports, although the issue has been in discussion for long. The gravity of the situation can be understood from the fact that a number of women were raped and killed inside the buses, too. Sadly, these incidents have not led to significant action on the part of the authorities. Prior to this survey, several other surveys in the past also revealed the toxic male-dominated environment in public transports where women could hardly raise their voices after being harassed or bullied. Although there has been a practice of keeping seats reserved for women, this is not enough to ensure their safety because either the seats are too few for the growing number of women and girls needing public buses, or, as is often the case, they are occupied by male commuters.

Moreover, reserving a few seats alone will not improve the situation as long as the patriarchal mindset of men remains unchanged. While awareness is needed among male passengers, especially male helpers, to change their mindsets, the existing laws against gender harassment/violence also need to be enforced to hold the perpetrators accountable. Women also need to be given necessary support so that they can file complaints against their harassers. In order to ensure this, the drivers and helpers, and even police officers, need to be given proper training on gender issues.

Experts have suggested some specific measures such as increasing the number of women-only buses, installing CCTV cameras and vehicle-tracking systems in all public transports, putting nameplates in every vehicle mentioning the names of drivers and helpers, conducting mobile court drives to punish the harassers, etc. It's time the authorities heeded these suggestions which, we hope, will help ensure a safe environment for female commuters.

WORLD ENVIRONMENT DAY

Saving our 'One Earth' before it's too late



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THE global community is preparing to celebrate the 50th World Environment Day today. As world leaders supposedly emphasise sustainable development, putting effort into finding feasible solutions to combat climate change before its worst effects are realised irreversibly, making countless promises for a sustainable future for all, it's important to take a look around, understand what's happening around us, and ask ourselves, "Are we actually on the right track to protect our One Earth?"

Let's take a step back from the global climate crisis and anthropocentric destruction of the Earth's life systems. Let's talk about the simple things. Water and Air. These are things that we need to survive. Yet we emerge today in an outrageous situation where many across the globe are denied these fundamental human rights. According to the World Health Organization, globally over 2 billion people live in countries that are water stressed and at least 2 billion people drink polluted and contaminated water. Around 99 percent of the entire world's population breathes air that exceeds WHO's air quality standards. This is a global public health crisis. According to water.org, in Bangladesh, more than 1.8 million people do not have access to safe drinking water. The State of Global Air 2020: How Does Air Pollution Affect Life Expectancy around the World report by the Health Effects Institute states that, the life expectancy loss in Bangladesh is 2.91 years. A life without access to clean air and clean water is a life deprived of dignity. As Bangladesh is scheduled to officially graduate from LDC status in 2026, without having access to clean air and clean water, this development rings empty when it doesn't bring significant positive change in the lives of the most marginalised.

Bangladesh has over 700 rivers and they provide the lifeblood for this country. On February 3, 2019, the High Court of Bangladesh issued a landmark decision declaring rivers to be legal entities with rights and appointing the National River Protection Commission (NRPC) as their legal custodian. Regardless of the decision, powerful industries have continued grabbing and polluting the rivers, disrupting their natural flow and destroying their biodiversity. According to Transparency International Bangladesh, 23 percent of wetlands in Dhaka and its surrounding areas were lost between

2010 and 2019. Grabbing and polluting the rivers would impact the vulnerability of the already vulnerable river dependent communities and traditional livelihoods such as fishing. In a country where 60 percent of people have their only animal protein intake from fish, this has every possibility to affect Bangladesh's food security. Rivers are not the only water bodies

the forest. This would be detrimental to the biodiversity, air quality, water quality, health of the plants, and livelihood of the local communities. Globally, the situation of the forests is not very hopeful either. According to IUCN's Issues Brief which was last reviewed in February 2021, more than half of the world's tropical forests have been destroyed since the 1960s, and every second, more than one hectare of



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FILE PHOTO: REUTERS

that are facing the repercussions of environmental degradation. According to the Ocean Conservation Trust, 50 percent of life-giving oxygen comes from the ocean. We have a huge amount of carbon reserved in the oceans. Ocean's plants absorb carbon dioxide and release oxygen in the atmosphere. This phenomenon shows how important of a role the ocean plays to maintain balance in our atmosphere. However, by polluting the oceans and the seas, we are only lowering their capacity to absorb carbon dioxide and release oxygen. Cox's Bazar, the world's largest sea beach has a tremendous pollution problem due to single use plastic at the hands of tourists. St Martin's Island, the only coral island in Bangladesh, is experiencing an increase in pollution with the rise of unchecked tourism. The region has also been touted as a future energy hub with large scale megaprojects such as the coal powered thermal power plants in Matarbari. Countless numbers of species, both underwater and on land, face risks due to habitat loss and ecosystem destruction.

The Sundarbans, the world's largest mangrove forest, has protected our country from catastrophic natural disasters. But the construction of Rampal Power Plant has put the future of the Sundarbans at stake where the power plant's discharge of pollutants would significantly hamper the ecosystem of

tropical forest is destroyed or severely degraded. Many species are threatened by forest degradation and loss. This reduces the forests' ability to provide essential services such as acting as important carbon sinks. Deforestation and forest degradation have an impact on the lives of 1.6 billion people who rely on forests for their livelihoods. One billion of them are among the poorest people on the planet.

With everything that's happening around the world and in our own country—destruction of lands, pollution of water bodies, exploitation of resources, suffering of the most marginalised people—it's not easy to stay hopeful. It's normal to be concerned about the future of the world, not just for us, but for our next generations. But as demoralising as all the phenomena mentioned above might be, giving up is not an option. It is up to the people to hold their representatives accountable for their lack of response to environmental degradation, and to hold the rich and powerful corporations accountable for destroying our natural resources. We as individuals can move away from single use plastic, waste less food, use less energy, but we must act now to change the systems that profit off the destruction of our earth. There is no second planet for us. This is our only home, and we must save it, before time runs out.

Social protection needs more in next budget



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NAWSHAD AHMED

THE social protection allocation in the annual budget has consistently increased over the last 14 years. In FY 2008-09, a total of Tk 13,845 crore was allocated for social protection programmes. This allocation was 14.71 percent of the annual budget and 2.25 percent of the GDP. In the FY 2021-22 budget, Tk 107,614 crore was allocated for social protection programmes. It was 17.83 percent of the annual budget and 3.11 percent of the GDP. However, it has not been possible to cover all eligible people under different social protection programmes despite the sustained increase in budgetary allocations.

The number of households benefiting from social protection programmes in the country went up two and half times, from 12 percent in 2005 to 30 percent in 2020. The number of programmes has also gone up from 77 in FY 2009-10 to 130 in FY 2019-20. It is believed that the increased level of public funding has contributed substantially to poverty reduction in Bangladesh. However, there are still over 10 percent of people categorised as "extreme poor" in the country. This number has gone up since mid-2020, due to the onslaught of the Covid-19 pandemic. But due to paucity of reliable data, it is difficult to estimate the percentage of people living in poverty now. The government undertook cash and food distribution to assist the new poor. These were in addition to the

regular social protection programmes which are aimed at reducing the social and economic vulnerabilities of the poor families.

There are about 130 social security projects and programmes in Bangladesh, the majority of which are small in size. Just a dozen of them employ almost 80 percent of the total social security budget. These projects and programmes can be mainly categorised in two different ways: 1. By sectors like health, nutrition, education, and infrastructure development, and 2. By life cycle, such as pregnancy and early age, school age, working age, and old age.

The government, under the leadership of the cabinet division, has developed the second phase of the Action Plan (2021-26) of the National Social Security Strategy (NSSS) to strengthen the overall efficiency and impact of social protection programmes. These programmes need to adopt appropriate targeting mechanisms to include the most deserving beneficiaries. Gradually, the government extended the payment of benefits through the Government-to-Person (G2P) system, using mobile financial services, for about 68 percent of total cash transferred. This has cut down corruption and is also cost-effective and time-saving.

After making significant progress on the payment aspect, the government is now focusing on the targeting side of social protection programmes. Identifying the most deserving beneficiaries is a challenge that needs to be resolved urgently for better utilisation of public resources. The government's recent decision of a universal cash transfer approach to improve the coverage of certain safety net programmes is a good one in this regard.

During the past two years, three programmes under the Department of Social Services have expanded coverage

and introduced an online self-registration system to 112 poverty-stricken upazilas in 2020-21 and to 150 upazilas in 2021-22. The three programmes are Old Age Allowance, Allowances for the Widow, Deserted and Destitute Women, and Allowances for the Financially Insolvent Disabled.

Anyone who believes they are eligible for any of these allowances can apply for it through www.mis.bhata.gov.bd. The Social Welfare Officers and upazila, union and paurashava committees verify the information and recommend the enrolment of those eligible into the programmes. The government is planning to cover 100 additional upazilas under this universal approach in FY 2022-23.

These three programmes truly cover the most vulnerable groups in society and the universalisation of coverage was needed to cover all those who deserve to receive benefits. There are definite financial implications of universalisation and, therefore, the government needs to allocate an increased amount of resources for social protection in the 2022-23 budget to cover newer applicants. Historically, in the 262 upazilas where the universal approach has been introduced during the last two years, the number of beneficiaries has increased substantially. The Old Age Allowance covers 5.7 million beneficiaries now across rural and urban areas, which includes about 50 percent of the elderly population of the country. The number increased rapidly from 4.4 million in 2018. The Allowances for Widow, Deserted and Destitute Women currently benefit 2.47 million women, while about one million persons receive disability allowances.

In the future, other major social protection programmes should also adopt the universal approach, and a digital self-registration system should be introduced for improved targeting of beneficiaries.

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