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Extend all support to Nilphamari rape survivor

Such victims need legal aid, protection and compensation

POOR, minor survivor of rape – there can't be a worse combination than this for someone grovelling through the corridors of justice in Bangladesh. Throw a powerful culprit into the mix, and you have a victim representing what is perhaps the most vulnerable group in our society. Such a case recently came to light when a 15-year-old girl from Nilphamari gained access to a High Court bench in session, and made the following appeal: "Sir, I have been raped. We are very poor. We have no money to move the case. I want justice from you."

She spoke directly to the sitting judges, who were astonished to hear this and quite touched by her story, an underage girl fighting alone and unaided, with nothing but the determination to get justice for the wrong done to her. She claimed to have been raped by a member of Border Guard Bangladesh (BGB). After she filed a case with a lower court in Nilphamari, the accused was acquitted. She wants to have the case moved to the High Court. We're happy to know that she has been promised legal representation. There is still a long way ahead, but we hope justice will be delivered fairly this time.

However, as encouraging as her grit is, the fact that a rape survivor had to go through such ordeal to get to this point is disquieting. This is but an example of the insurmountable challenges that the victims of rape and domestic violence often have to face while seeking justice. Many victims drop their case mid-trial, many never even filing a complaint. Threats of further harm by the accused, adverse societal attitude, lack of access to legal aid services, lack of state protection and compensation, systemic barriers as well as the biased, unhelpful attitude of relevant officials – there can be any number of reasons for this situation.

Added to the uncertainty is the fact that securing a conviction in a criminal court itself remains a daunting task. Conviction rates in cases handled by the Women and Children Repression Prevention Tribunals are measly at best. This leads to criminals feeling emboldened and, in many cases, repeating their crimes. There is, clearly, a lot that needs to change. For victims like the Nilphamari rape survivor, this begins with increasing the reach of the National Legal Aid Services Organisation (NLASO) and proper execution of the Legal Aid Services Act, 2000. The government as well as the judiciary must ensure that all victims are properly represented, protected and compensated.

How much longer must the Birangonas suffer?

Remove bureaucratic hurdles and harassment in certification as freedom fighters

THE story of the Birangonas in Bangladesh is one of contradictions – of state recognition on the one hand, and social ostracisation on the other. Though Father of the Nation Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman awarded the title of "Birangona" to honour the sacrifices of the women who were systematically tortured during the Liberation War, for five decades, they were subjected to ridicule, harassment and persecution by the society at large – including state institutions – because of their "Birangona" status. In 2015, the government undertook another commendable initiative – 41 Birangonas were gazetted as freedom fighters for the first time. Till then, a total of 448 have been gazetted as freedom fighters.

A recent study by Transparency International Bangladesh (TIB) reveals the irregularities, complexities and harassment in the process of recognition and provision of benefits to Birangonas. They have to wait for more than three years to be gazetted as freedom fighters, and wait for at least three to six months to start getting an allowance due to bureaucratic delays. It takes more than six years to get a house under the "Bir Nibash" project, which provides accommodation to financially insolvent freedom fighters. The TIB report also mentioned instances of extortion and bribery, adding that applicants did not report the irregularities due to fear of further harassment and delay.

There does not appear to be any systematic plans in place to identify the Birangonas at the local level, and those who do come forward on their own have to jump through numerous bureaucratic hoops and face intrusive questions to access the benefits. Many of the applicants wonder if they will ever see the benefits during their lifetime, despite being prodded over and over to "prove" their eligibility.

Given the circumstances, it is imperative that the government revisit this commendable initiative and remove the numerous hurdles in the process. There needs to be a specific time frame during which the process must be completed. We agree with the TIB recommendation that a specific framework needs to be developed to identify the Birangonas. However, the government must engage with the female freedom fighters and civil society organisations working with them to ensure that the process of identification does not result in further humiliation of the women and their families. The report also suggested that the Liberation War Affairs ministry assign specific personnel at local levels to assist in the process of availing all the facilities – starting from the application process to gazette notification. We believe such personnel should receive orientation and gender sensitivity training on how to work with the female freedom fighters.

These women have suffered too much, on too many fronts, for Bangladesh's independence, but they were never treated with dignity. It is high time we started treating these freedom fighters with the respect they deserve.

Education budget not enough for 40 million learners



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RASHEDA K CHOUDHURY

THE government has declared the national budget at a time when the world is still reeling from the Covid pandemic. And now, we are looking at yet another global crisis of energy and food security. No doubt, these have come as big shocks for Bangladesh. A budget declared at such a critical juncture is expected to present a way to absorb some of the shocks.

It seems the focus of the budget has mostly been on bringing the economy back on track. However, the government appears to have ignored the fact that the education sector is suffering immensely from Covid impacts, and that, without appropriate interventions and judicious investment, we risk jeopardising the future of a whole generation of Bangladeshis. In fact, this year's budget looks like any other budget from the previous years. It does not reflect the aspirations of the 40 million learners, half a million teachers and the millions of their family members who have been struggling to minimise the massive learning loss that has aggravated pre-existing inequalities in accessing quality education.

The Ministry of Primary and Mass Education and the Ministry of Education both prepared Covid response and recovery plans. But there is no indication in the budget as to how these plans are to be implemented. Bangladesh, over the last 50 years, has achieved some milestones in education. For instance, Bangladesh has been acclaimed globally for achieving gender parity in enrolment at the primary and secondary levels and also at the teacher level. An increasing number of students are enrolling into technical and vocational programmes. But how can we retain these achievements moving forward? The proposed budget has not provided any indication in this regard.

Covid taught us that we need to move forward with a combination of both offline and online lessons. Though the budget does highlight the importance of ICT to some extent, there is no recognition of the inequalities in accessing digital technologies which were further exacerbated during the pandemic. The finance minister has mentioned that 170 million people have mobile phones,

but what about the increasing expenses related to internet facilities that a huge segment of our population can't afford?

The focus of the world is to bring students back to schools, to retain them in classes and to ensure they are not lagging behind. In order to do so, there needs to be provisions for adequate funding. However, our budget has seen only a nominal increase for education

The government needs to think of education as a single sector – from primary to higher education, including technical, vocational, and professional education – and it should get the single largest allocation in the budget.

In terms of the declared budget, the government should think about reallocating some of the resources to critical and overlooked areas, such as bringing children back to schools, mitigating learning loss and addressing malnutrition. We want a specific budget to target vulnerable and excluded groups, such as children with disabilities – not simply as part of social safety net allocation but specifically for education.

The amount of the stipends should be doubled considering the inflation over the years. Even if it is not possible to implement this right away, it should remain as the government's vision and objective to increase the amount and widen the outreach of the stipends. There has to be a specific allocation for victims of early marriage in 2020 and 2021 to encourage them to come back to schools/colleges.

I felt happy to hear when the finance minister mentioned the new curriculum, but implementation of a new curriculum requires specific allocation. It focuses more on creative learning, values education, continuous assessment and innovative practices inside the classroom. If we really want to make these changes happen, we need to allocate money, as and where required.

The nation is going to enjoy the fruits of "megaprojects" like Padma Bridge thanks to our government. But if we don't invest enough in developing our human resources, how are we hoping to sustain the results of our mega initiatives? Unfortunately, this year's budget has almost no indication of investing in youth who are expected to lead the country in 2041.

Finally, allocation is just one side of the coin. We also need to focus on budget utilisation and monitoring. There is hardly any point in pressing for more funds, if we don't utilise the budget effectively. In his budget speech, the finance minister mentioned timely completion of education and health sector projects as one of six challenges. It is evident that the government mechanism should be strengthened and committed to ensure accountability and transparency while utilising the budget at each and every stage.

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from the past year – 12 percent of the total budget, compared to 11.9 percent in FY2021-22. When compared to the GDP ratio, it is only 1.83 percent, less than the outgoing fiscal year's allocation and the lowest in South Asia. This is undoubtedly disappointing, particularly considering the present scenario in education.

To meet our SDG targets, our government is committed to allocate at least 4-6 percent of GDP for education. But what about our National Education Policy (NEP) 2010, which was adopted in the parliament? There is almost no reflection of all of these commitments in the proposed national budget.

Also, why is there so little allocation for research in education? Research is all the more relevant now, particularly in light of Covid, because we need credible, scientific data for realistic planning. We don't know exactly how many have dropped out of the education system, how many have become victims of early marriage or how many learners have joined the labour force. If we want credible data, we have to invest in research.

Tax has been levied on private universities again, as was attempted last year. The burden of this tax will no doubt fall on the students and their families who are already struggling to face the challenges of inflation. Can the government ensure that universities pay the tax from their profits without imposing it on their students?

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PROJECT ■ SYNDICATE

Today's Crises Are Different



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MAURICIO CARDENAS

JUST as one generation gives way to the next, global challenges are superseded by a new cohort. The once-in-a-century Covid-19 pandemic – and the risk that other dangerous new viruses may emerge at any time – is far from the only example. Extreme weather events resulting from climate change are having catastrophic consequences. Information technology and data are sometimes used maliciously or for cyberwarfare. Even today's surging food prices and rising global hunger can be traced to a failure to disseminate open source technologies.

We seemingly live in a permanent state of danger. Crises are no longer isolated tail-risk events that affect a few. They are much more frequent, multidimensional and interdependent, and – because they transcend national borders – have the potential to affect everyone simultaneously. Moreover, they involve so many externalities that both markets and national governments have insufficient incentive to solve them.

Solutions to these problems depend on the availability of global public goods, but the current international system is unable to provide a sufficient supply. We need major coordinated investments in pandemic preparedness and response, for example, or to reduce greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions (a global public bad), because no individual country's actions will resolve today's crises, much less prevent new ones.

A rethink of the way multilateralism works is imperative. The post-war international financial architecture was designed to support national

governments so that they could provide national public goods. The priority now is to think about the new institutions required to provide public goods that transcend national borders.

The overlapping nature of current crises makes an even stronger case for a new framework. Greater frequency of extreme weather events, such as floods and droughts, heighten the risk of infectious and waterborne diseases. Rising average temperatures and altered rainfall patterns are reducing the potential yield of staple crops (by six percent in the case of maize, for example) that are crucial for food security – an essential component of good health. In 2010-19, the proportion of the global land surface suffering extreme drought in any month reached 22 percent, up from 13 percent in 1950-99.

Previous emergencies, like the global financial crisis of 2008-09 (which was really a developed world phenomenon) or the Asian and Latin American financial crises of the late 1990s, were essentially economic in nature, resulting from the excessive accumulation of financial risks. The solutions were in the hands of central bankers and finance ministers. They included new financial regulations and fiscal and monetary policies to restore lost employment and output.

Today's crises, in contrast, are interdependent and truly global in scope, with potentially a much greater impact. What is distinctive is that solutions no longer depend exclusively on the competence of national economic authorities. Addressing them effectively requires leadership and action between governments around the world. One example of this approach is the proposed Global Health Threats Council. The early detection of pandemic threats and the development of herd immunity against known pathogens is a classic case of a non-rival and non-excludable global public good.

But taxpayers in individual countries lack the incentives to provide goods whose benefits are enjoyed globally. Moreover, we cannot expect official development

assistance (ODA) or philanthropy to do the job. The numbers simply don't add up. ODA totalled USD 180 billion last year, with private donors adding a few billion more. But global public goods require trillions of dollars. Moreover, aid budgets are too cyclical, and priorities shift. But what seems urgent and politically appealing does not always coincide with what is important, which should be the focus of global public goods.

That is why we need to introduce a new multilateral system. Ideally, its main elements should mirror the tools used to provide national public goods: taxation, incentives, and accountability.

Since global public goods require significant and stable financing, we should focus on building global fiscal capacity, universally funded on an ability-to-pay basis. Leadership at the national level is, of course, also required to ensure an adequate cross-government and cross-sectoral response.

Providing taxpayers and governments with the right incentives to act will not be easy. But most governments take the International Monetary Fund's periodic Article IV consultations very seriously; including an assessment of how they are addressing climate and pandemic risks would be a good start. Likewise, credit-rating agencies should expand the methodologies they use to assess risks for governments and corporations.

The world is unprepared to cope with the new generation of crises. Rather than focusing only on deficiencies in one particular area when a crisis hits, we need to understand why we are systematically bad at producing the global public goods that all these new crises require. Unless we address this issue, specific gaps will continue to appear. If another pandemic threat were to emerge tomorrow, for example, we would be no better prepared than we were for Covid-19.

The current climate, health, and food crises should trigger the global collaboration needed to tackle such threats. If they don't, it is fair to ask what would.

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