

Home, not a cage. Safety, not a curfew.



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NAHALY NAFISA KHAN

I have always envied my male friends for having too much freedom. The freedom to roam around the city streets in the quiet and calmness of the night. The freedom to randomly plan trips and stayovers. The freedom of enjoying an entire concert without missing the headliner’s performance and not worrying about getting home.

Only later in my life did I realise that it was never too much freedom, it was only the natural amount of freedom that they had access to, while we did not.

Our access to the most basic of things – going out for a night stroll on the city streets, coming home late at night from work without being scared for our lives – have always been restricted owing to safety issues, as we have always been told.

We would be reminded of the deeply rooted misogyny in every sphere of life. That no one is ready to ensure your safety, but will blame you for things that you have no fault in. That it’s easier to cage yourself rather than ask for security and justice.

Around 9:30pm on July 17, a Chittagong University (CU) student was sexually assaulted by a group of young men, who recorded the incident to threaten her into silence. After much delay, the CU proctorial body took the victim’s complaint, which was followed by a meeting of all hall provosts who came to a unanimous decision of imposing a curfew on the female university students. As per the new directives, no female student will be allowed to enter dormitories after 10:00pm.

The decision was met with a powerful protest by CU students, who asked the most valid question: “Is it legal to harass us on our own campus after 10:00pm?”

This is 2022. Imagine asking for



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PHOTO: COLLECTED

security from your own alma mater and being caged as part of the solution. Your perpetrators will roam free, while you will be locked inside the confines of your dorms. Talk about progressive and liberal values.

Universities are supposed to be the most progressive and liberal spaces in a country. They should be the one institution that promotes freethinking, freedom of speech, expression, and movement that offers equal opportunities for intellectual growth and a safe environment for everyone, regardless of their race, class, and gender.

In reality, our universities don’t fit into this category. The curfew culture for women is prevalent in all public universities across the country. At the

beginning of this year, I worked on a story on this issue that required me to talk to female students of many public universities to know their take on it. While sharing their experiences and difficulties with the curfew, all of them unanimously agreed on one thing: It is an outdated practice that needs to go.

Yet our guardians, our teachers, fail to listen to our voices and impose an outdated practice more strictly. The authorities have always claimed that it is for the girls’ safety that they impose curfew. If the girls are not comfortable entering the dorm after curfew and have to travel halfway across the city to find a place for the night, how does that make them any safer? Does this not empower the potential perpetrators and the existing narrative of victim-

blaming?

The curfew leaves little to no scope for residential female students to engage in extracurricular activities, internships, or even enjoy a concert happening on the campus premises. All the students that I talked to have called this rule inherently misogynistic, as no such provision exists for the male students of any university, who can enter their dorms at any time of the night. Why have the authorities focused so much on barring the movement of female students in the name of ensuring safety, rather than ensuring exemplary punishment for sexual predators? What steps have been taken to ensure the safety of women on our campuses?

Why do the sexual harassment

prevention cells remain inactive in most universities despite a clear directive from the High Court? Why have they been made inaccessible to the students? Why does information regarding the cell remain nowhere to be seen on the websites of the universities? How many complaints have they taken so far and how many cases of harassment have they solved as of yet?

I talked to a CU student who has been at the forefront of the ongoing movement. She told me that some 10 months ago, another female student of CU lodged a sexual harassment complaint that is yet to be resolved.

In 2016, another student was harassed in the medical centre of the university by an on-duty doctor. When she filed a complaint, new regulations were imposed. Female students could only get treatment from female doctors, and as no female doctors were available after 9:30pm, in case of medical emergencies, female students would have to be accompanied by the house tutors of their respective halls.

“Imagine the absurdity of the provision. On one occasion of sickness, I needed to be injected with saline immediately. When my friends took me to the medical centre, they refused to treat me because my house tutor did not accompany me. How do I get the house tutor at 2:00am in the morning?” said my friend from CU.

The accused doctor is still employed in the medical centre, while female students are denied treatment during medical emergencies. Our universities hold us back for gender, while they should be the pioneers of the movement against patriarchy and misogyny.

More than anything else, our alma maters are supposed to be our homes. And home is where all your needs are met. Where you return after long tiring days for peace, without any anxiety. Where you’re truly free. Where you’re safe and protected.

And what we need is a home, not a cage. It’s the need of the hour that the authorities listen to our voices, before the feminine rage becomes a bit too much for them to take.

Is load-shedding a symptom of Bangladesh’s energy insecurity?



AN OPEN DIALOGUE

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A headline on July 7 in The Daily Star announced, “PM considering reduced electricity production to save fuel”. I have been regularly receiving messages about the recent episodes of load shedding, and not only from the poorer neighbourhoods of Dhaka, but from other cities and towns across the country. Load shedding in Bangladesh has now reached an alarming level. Rumours are heard that the government might soon mandate a work at home policy to conserve electricity. Fortunately, those who are privileged enough to live in apartment buildings with backup power generators feel less of the bite than the rest of the population, but one has to wonder how long this temporary respite would last.

Only a few months ago, our energy security appeared within reach and the leaders were leaning towards a transition towards a cleaner energy strategy. Last October, in a column in this newspaper, I touted the success story of Bangladesh’s power sector (“How to fix the mess in the power sector?”, The Daily Star, October 9, 2021). The country had previously in July 2021 cancelled 10 coal-powered power plant projects to reduce its future carbon footprint. There was constant talk about reduced carbon footprints, and an official of the power and energy ministry announced, “There is a concern globally about (the use of) coal and we have to adhere to that. The government is committed to reducing carbon emissions.”

The tone has changed significantly since then. After Japan’s JICA cancelled funding for Phase 2 of the Matarbari coal-fired power plant, the PM’s energy advisor asked at a recent conference in Dhaka, “When Europe is going back to the coal-fired power plants and investing millions of dollars, how could

you [Japan] take the decision to not finance Matarbari?”

We had energy surplus a few months ago, and now the country is facing the prospect of “reduced electric supply” until September, and perhaps beyond. For example, the PM on July 5, 2022 declared that the government is considering “area-based load shedding” for a specific period to save fuel used for power generation. “Today, I think that I will tell (the authority concerned) to reduce electricity production for some time (every day) to save fuel used for power generation,” she said.

So, what happened, or as they say in Spanish “que pasa”? How did things change so fast that we careened from an optimistic “zero carbon” by 2050 scenario to a more sombre assessment with discussions of a traditional non-renewable and more carbon-intensive strategy? Well, the geo-political outlook has changed and much else. Inflation, the Ukraine war, and galloping prices of oil and gas have concurrently taken a toll on our plan to shift to clean energy.

Bangladesh, like all other countries, will now need to pay greater attention to its goal of energy security in light of the changing global economic and political reality and carefully balance the cost of rapid transition to cleaner sources of energy. In a New York Times op-ed, Mark Malloch-Brown, former UN deputy secretary general writes that, “The energy transition plans of South Africa indicate the scale of the challenge. Switching from coal to renewable energies like solar, wind and hydropower will cost some USD 250 billion over the next three decades, around 3 percent of South Africa’s GDP.” It was earlier expected that the richer countries would fund the technology transition programmes of developing countries, but they are now investing in armaments, new energy sources, and in their own war games.

Bangladesh is now justifiably soft-peddalling on previous plans to go “zero carbon” in 2050. The energy adviser to the PM vehemently denied Bangladesh had made any promise regarding net zero emissions by 2050. “Bangladesh is a very low carbon emission country and that is why the promise of net zero emissions by 2050 will not be applicable for Bangladesh”, the PM’s



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PHOTO: STAR

energy advisor said at a recent seminar on Integrated Energy and Power Master Plan (IEPMP).

Looking forward, Bangladesh needs to take another look at its long-term energy strategy. The leaders must reassess some of the past misguided policies. “Oil and gas remain central to global energy systems and are key to energy security, at least in the near and mid-term,” according to professor Ernest J Moniz, a former US Secretary of Energy and professor of physics and engineering systems emeritus at MIT. “Sloganeering against the transitional role of fossil fuels has impeded progress on both climate change and energy security. Climate change and energy security must be one conversation to most effectively address both,” Moniz adds.

The government has signalled that it is now in favour of power generation using coal. Coal is making a comeback as energy needs grow, while poorer countries are struggling to secure supplies of LNG. It is expected that the

price of gas will subside in the coming year.

My research of the gas market leads me to believe that price volatility is likely to get worse. Natural gas prices have surged globally since the war in Ukraine and jumped from USD 4 per unit in 2020 to USD 41 today. “The European gas crisis is sucking the world dry of LNG,” said Valery Chow, head of Asia Pacific gas and LNG research at Wood Mackenzie, an energy consulting firm. “Emerging markets in Asia have borne the brunt of this and there is no end in sight.”

The dilemma for Bangladesh is multi-pronged. The coal-fired plants are facing the loss of credit while the tight LNG market is squeezing all energy out of our foreign exchange reserves. The state minister for the Ministry of Power, Energy, and Mineral Resources, however, expressed optimism that a short-term plan to extract 618 million cft additional gas from 46 wells in the country might bring some results in three years.

“Nuclear energy is a significant part of the clean energy future. There is far less carbon emission from solar energy. Along with that, new technologies will be our priority,” he added. Bangladesh could be a beneficiary of the funds that the Biden administration is pouring into nuclear technology as well as renewable resources like solar and wind power.

As for the volatile oil market, prices might drop further in the coming months. The Paris-based International Energy Agency has cut its forecasts for oil demand for this year and the next. In a report published on July 12 by OPEC, the global demand growth for oil is projected to come down next year to 2.7 million barrels from the 3.4 million barrels a day in 2022. This projection is based on the decline in projected GDP growth in European economies and the USA due to soaring inflation and rising interest rates. China’s economic recovery is also expected to be slow, further easing the pressure on oil markets.