

Public transport still unsafe for women

The issue must get proper attention from the policymakers

OVER the past few years, several surveys have been conducted on women commuting on public transport to understand the extent of harassment they have to undergo – and the results have been nothing short of alarming. In the latest survey, conducted online during May-June, it was found that around 87 percent of women faced some form of harassment on public transport at least once in their lives. The survey, conducted on over 5,000 women across 24 districts, has also revealed that 36 percent of female commuters faced sexual harassment on buses, launches, trains and at terminals, and 57 percent of respondents considered public transport as totally unsafe.

Recently, another survey conducted by an NGO to learn about the psychological impacts of such harassment on women and girls led to the finding that around half of the victims of harassment suffer from mental health issues later in their lives. These findings are concerning, to say the least, and should get proper attention from our policymakers.

Unfortunately, despite these damning surveys on female commuters, we haven't seen or heard of any steps taken by the authorities to make public transport safe for them. Such inaction makes harassers feel emboldened, and consequently we might see a further uptick in such incidents in the future. The question is: why are the authorities not giving the issue the importance it deserves? The organisations that have conducted the surveys have also come up with suggestions to improve the situation. Among them are installing CCTV cameras and vehicle-tracking systems in all passenger vehicles, mentioning the names of drivers and helpers in the nameplates of every vehicle, etc. These are basic safety measures that can be undertaken any moment. So, what is stopping them from doing this bare minimum?

Taking such steps will definitely help identify the culprits, and also deter potential culprits from harassing female passengers in the future. Besides, increasing the number of women-only buses and having a system where women can lodge complaints for public transport harassment are also vital. The fact that only 36 percent of women protested when they were harassed and only one percent went to law enforcers for redressal, as revealed by the recent survey, reflect the stigma and lack of social or legal support extended to the victims.

However, taking the above-mentioned steps alone will not solve the issue; for that, we need to address the root of the problem. The society's mindset that public transport is a place for men, and men's perception that women are occupying their space, need to be changed. Such patriarchal mindsets have had disturbing consequences in other areas as well. A change in this scenario is only possible if our policymakers properly respond to them.

Reading at public expense!

How does a book reading project for public officials help us?

WE'RE surprised to learn of an initiative by the ministry of public administration that ostensibly aims to cultivate reading habits among government officials. Although the idea may sound appealing, the devil is in the details. According to a report by *Prothom Alo*, more than Tk 9 crore was allocated to the zila and upazila administrations as part of the project, while the deputy commissioners (DCs) and upazila nirbahi officers (UNOs) were handed a list of 1,477 books to purchase them. Worryingly, however, over a hundred books from the list were found to be written by around 25 public officials, many covering similar topics.

Among them are top bureaucrats, and even an MP who has four books, including three on the same subject. The biggest share of the pie goes to an additional secretary of the ministry, who has a total of 29 books in the list, mostly on poetry. There are various other secretary-level writers as well. In total, there are 166 books on Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman alone, 40 of which were written by 15 public officials. Other subjects include law, various administrative issues, history, philosophy, etc. But books by many important writers were left out, which raises questions about the selection method. Reportedly, no committee was formed to undertake this initiative, nor was any expert engaged to select books. There is also no clarity on where the books would be kept, and no reading-related instructions for government officials either.

The whimsical manner in which the project was undertaken and its timing, coming as it does amid a national economic crisis, put a question mark on the integrity of project officials, and potentially cancel out any expected gain from this. We cannot help but ask: If intellectual stimulation among officials is the goal, why select books without engaging experts who could make a list tailored to their needs? Why exclude more prominent writers in favour of bureaucrats? And, as an expert rightly pointed out, should public servants be reading when they're expected to serve the public? The personal (and financial) motivations of those involved with the project seem to have overridden the bigger objective of what is, frankly, a pointless project at a time when the head of state has been repeatedly urging us to undertake austerity measures and avoid overspending.

This is but another example of sheer wastefulness often seen in unnecessary or poorly planned projects of the government, which serve no useful purpose but end up squandering huge amounts of public money. We're told that the public administration ministry has plans to continue this initiative through the next three fiscal years. This will be a bad idea. We urge the ministry to reconsider its decision.



THE OVERTON WINDOW

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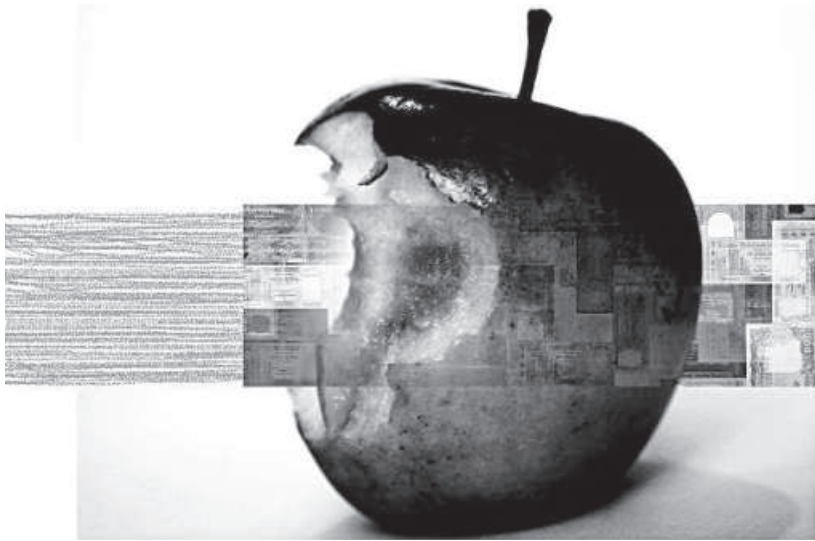
BANGLADESH has a terrible history with indemnity laws. In 1975, the martial law regime led by Khandaker Mushtaque Ahmed passed an indemnity ordinance to protect the killers of Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman and his family members, which the Awami League government scrapped after assuming power in 1996. Similarly, the Bangladesh Constitution's Fifth Amendment passed by the second parliament had validated and ratified all actions of the martial law regimes between August 15, 1975 and April 9, 1979. And another martial law ruler, Ershad, indemnified himself and all his actions through the passing of the constitution's Seventh Amendment in 1986.

In 1988, in the Anwar Hossain Chowdhury vs Bangladesh case, the Supreme Court said the power of judicial review was a basic feature of the constitution and could not be taken away or curtailed even by amending the constitution. Ultimately, both the fifth and seventh amendments were declared illegal and void.

After the so-called restoration of democracy, the BNP first brought back this authoritarian practice by indemnifying the joint forces against legal actions during Operation Clean Heart in 2003. In 2015, the High Court again scrapped that, paving the way for the families of the victims of the operation to seek justice.

In a similar authoritarian exercise, the Awami League passed the Quick Enhancement of Electricity and Energy Supply (Special Provision) Act in 2010, indemnifying the government for its actions in the energy sector from judicial proceedings. Though it was initially passed under the guise of urgent power generation necessities, it has proven to be anything but that. The government, despite protests from experts, kept on extending this indemnity for more than a decade. And today, the national energy crisis we are facing is a direct result of the corruption and nepotism that the government has allowed to take place using the indemnity law.

According to energy expert Dr Ijaz Hossain, despite government sycophants boasting its energy policy success, "the [energy] crisis has been there all along," and the government, due to external factors, is being "compelled to recognise it



VISUAL: KAZI TASHIN AGAZ APURBO

Why do government officials working in our energy sector need indemnity to do their job? What is it they fear? That their corruption may get exposed?

now as it cannot hide [it] any longer." "Bureaucrats got themselves engaged in corruption without any fear because of the indemnity offered in the law, and it led to a complete regulatory failure," said Shamsul Alam, energy adviser to the Consumers Association of Bangladesh (CAB). That after spending thousands of crores of taxpayers' money we are back to the days of load-shedding that we saw some 10-15 years back is a clear testament to this government's failed energy policy.

Now that the cat is out of the bag, is it any wonder that a recommendation has been made to a parliamentary standing committee to bring back a martial-law-era provision to shield the officials of the state-run Petrobangla from legal proceedings, for supposedly "acting in good faith"? Supporting this, the additional attorney general argued that if any official who performs duties in the interest of Petrobangla gets "immunity or indemnity," they will do their job freely and without fear. But if I may ask, who is stopping the officials of Petrobangla – the more common name for Bangladesh Oil, Gas and Mineral Corporation – from doing their duties? The citizens sure aren't – the government never listens to their concerns when it comes to the energy sector in particular, and most matters that concern the state in general. And what is it that they fear? That they might get exposed for their corruption?

A day after the media reported on this absurd recommendation, the Parliamentary Standing Committee on Public Undertakings expressed shock at the widespread irregularities in the state-run Bangladesh Petroleum Corporation (BPC). According to the committee's findings, "There is little transparency in the state-run BPC," which hasn't had any external audit of

a recently released research on power purchase between 2004 and 2017 found that uncompetitive deals with some private power plants resulted in high power prices that cost taxpayers around USD 1 billion a year in subsidies. The study also explored how consumer prices are marked up by "collusive investments" by politically well-connected investors, and how the BPDB has bought power from some power plants at 25 percent higher price than other identical power plants.

Additionally, "collusive contracting" has contributed to sectoral corruption, such as more expensive plants receiving orders before their lower-cost counterparts. "The government's contracts with high-cost rental power plants state that if they were not given orders for power, they would still be paid for 60 percent of the power they could have produced," according to a report in this daily. This has led to the payment of enormous amounts of capacity charges over the years, which has been pushed onto the end consumers.

According to Bangladesh Working Group on External Debt (BWGED), the government paid a staggering Tk 72,567 crore to private power generators in capacity charge over the decade until 2021, which corresponds to the BPDB's piling losses of Tk 76,115 crore incurred over the same period of time. The BWGED's member-secretary explained it perfectly, "The capacity charge could be defined, in other words, as a means of transferring public money to private pockets, sometimes to foreign companies."

According to Jahangirnagar University professor Anu Muhammad, between 2011-12 and 2021-2022, various private companies involved with Bangladesh's power sector were given Tk 90,000 crore. Out of this, almost Tk 60,000 crore was given to just 12 companies – not to produce electricity, but to sit idle. The highest recipient among them was the Summit Group, followed by some UK and Malaysia-based groups, the United Group, the Orion Group, and some Indian companies. And, as it turns out, the amount of money that is being paid to different Indian companies such as Reliance and Adani, other foreign companies and top Bangladeshi power companies is bigger than the loans that Bangladesh is seeking from multilateral organisations such as the International Monetary Fund (IMF).

Had the power sector indemnity laws not created such fertile grounds for corruption, not only would we not be in this crisis, but we may not have had to borrow money either, putting our future at risk. That is why any attempt to legitimise further indemnity laws must now be opposed by the people at all costs.

Higher irrigation costs put our food security at risk



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THE purpose of this article is not to evaluate the rationale or timing and the rate of increase in fuel prices. The intention here is to draw the attention of Bangladesh's policy circle to the potential impact of increased irrigation costs on the country's farmers. This is due to the increased diesel price, which will have an impact on the ongoing Aman rice season and the upcoming Boro rice cultivation beginning in December. It also aims to draw attention to the possible way forward to address this issue in the context of uncertainties in the global food market.

Let's begin with shallow tube wells, which irrigate about two-thirds of the total irrigated area in Bangladesh. About 80 percent of 1.4 million shallow tube wells in the country are run by diesel, while the remaining 20 percent are operated by electricity, although some of them are supported by standby diesel engines in order to cope with frequent power cuts during the peak irrigation season in March and April. A shallow tube well engine usually burns about 300 litres of diesel for Boro irrigation, which may vary with the frequency of irrigation depending on pump command area, soil type and topography. With a hike of Tk 34 per litre of diesel, an average shallow pump will then incur an additional cost of Tk 10,200 for Boro irrigation only. So, a

crude estimation shows that farmers would have to spend an additional Tk 1,300 crore in total for irrigation via shallow tube wells. Similarly, about 200,000 of low-lift pumps, which are used in some of the irrigated areas, would need another additional Tk 200 crore for surface water irrigation.

At the same time, the price of urea fertiliser has also been increased. One may note that farmers have to buy diesel and fertilisers at a higher rate at retail level than the government-fixed prices. Meanwhile, the rise in the prices of essential commodities has caused a sudden surge in the wages for agricultural labour. The raising of Aman seedlings was affected by early floods in many areas, and the seedlings are already being sold at higher prices than normal. All this means that, in addition to climate-induced uncertainties, farming is becoming more and more expensive and risky.

Agriculture this year has become more difficult to manage due to scanty rainfall resulting in a prolonged drought situation. The peak rainy season was supposed to be right now. But very little or no rain here and there has already caused delay in Aman paddy planting, and it is likely to interfere with the early planting of potato, another important food crop. Many farmers are helplessly using their groundwater pumps to flood lands for transplanting

Aman seedlings. If this unusual delay in planting is followed by a continuation of drought in the coming months, Aman, the second largest rice crop in Bangladesh, is destined to be seriously affected.

Given this critical situation, farmers in Bangladesh are in real trouble – both financially and weather-wise. They have no other choice but to continue with production, because any shortfall in their production may have serious consequences for the food security of their families as well as the country. We believe that the government is well aware and concerned about the production implications of the diesel price hike. With a view to maintaining farmers' incentives to invest in rice production in such an abnormal situation, a number of ways out can be considered.

Firstly, in consideration of the additional cost of Aman and Boro irrigation indicated above, an emergency fund of Tk 2,000 crore or so can be created to support paddy farmers. This fund can then make provisions for reimbursement of Tk 10,000 to each of the operating shallow tube well owners. It should be possible for the Department of Agriculture Extension (DAE) to collect the list of genuine pump owners through their nationwide union level agriculture officers. The administrative process and the decision to this effect may involve some time. But if such a decision can be declared immediately, irrigation pump owners will get confidence, and I believe they will have the economic incentives to invest extra money to provide irrigation services for themselves as well as for those farmers buying water from them. But a condition must be imposed for such reimbursement of cost: pump owners must not claim an additional price for irrigation on the excuse of the

rise in diesel price.

Secondly, 35,000 deep tube wells cover about one-fourth of groundwater irrigation, and most of these are run by electricity. The Bangladesh Rural Electrification Board (BREF) and Bangladesh Power Development Board (BPDB) can be instructed to supply electricity without increasing the tariff for operating irrigation pumps.

Thirdly, the government has to take appropriate measures so that our farmers continue to get good prices for their paddy harvest, as they have in the past few years. For this, the government's paddy procurement programme has to be enhanced so that paddy prices at harvest are kept at an incentive level. This requires collection and use of proper data for rice production and storage at the public and private levels, so that the government can make informed decisions with respect to the quantity and timing of rice import, if that's needed at all. It is very important that we don't suffer from our own confusion or mistakes about public information.

Fourthly, since energy prices are declining internationally, it would be wise to adjust the domestic price of diesel quickly – certainly before the onset of the next Boro season.

Finally, in order to reduce pressure on our diesel-run irrigation system, the government should expand solar-powered irrigation by removing any legal or procedural obstacles.

It should be reiterated that the prospects of Aush and Aman rice do not look bright this season due to unfavourable weather conditions. So more discrete policy attention must be given to Boro rice in order to ensure national food security. Increase in rice production must be given the topmost priority.