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Are public hospitals above the law?

Govt must investigate bloated Covid-time spending by health facilities

THERE is no denying that public hospitals, just like any other service sector in the country, are riddled with corruption, so much so that what we know is assumed to be the tip of a colossal iceberg. These institutions remain a cog in the big corruption machine that the health sector has turned out to be. Having commented on this just the other day, when it was reported that financial irregularities worth Tk 193 crore were found by the Comptroller and Auditor General (CAG) in Health Directorate purchases, it is painful to see a similar case so soon, this time involving public hospitals in Dhaka. Reportedly, the CAG, after auditing their spending in the early stages of the pandemic in FY 2019-2020, found that medical equipment was purchased at astronomical prices.

Overall, thanks to such irregularities, the government lost at least Tk 29.94 crore of the Tk 320.23 crore it had spent during that time, as per an audit report of the CAG. There was an additional loss of Tk 10 crore if the estimate given by an additional secretary is factored in. All this was due to procurement and billing irregularities, committed by those in charge of the hospitals as well as syndicates operating behind the scenes.

For example, the Kuwait Bangladesh Friendship Government Hospital (KBFGH) bought two ECG Machines at Tk 6.25 lakh each, although the market price was Tk 1.99 lakh. Kurmitola General Hospital purchased a high-flow oxygen therapy device for Tk 7.5 lakh when its price was Tk 4.9 lakh. Mugda General Hospital bought a Video Laryngoscope for Tk 6.25 lakh when its price was Tk 1.99 lakh. Similar anomalies were also found in the purchase of medical and surgical requisites (MSR) and Covid-19 quarantine expenditure of 15 public medical college hospitals and specialised healthcare institutions in Dhaka. The difference between the buying and market prices was also seen in the procurement of drugs and pathological accessories.

One example of irregularities in quarantine bills was paying for hotel rooms (for medical professionals) that didn't exist. In short, there was misappropriation of money in every area where emergency spending was required, which remains unaddressed to this day.

These mis-procurements and false billings – two familiar enablers of corruption in our public sector – only lend credence to the media portrayal of a ministry that earned notoriety for its mishandling of the pandemic in its early stages, causing massive public suffering. And far from punishing those who exploited this once-in-a-lifetime health crisis to fill their own coffers, it continued to tolerate and even enable them. The question is, who are these mystery shoppers and billers? Who operate these syndicates which we so often hear about? How long will public hospitals remain unaccountable?

The health ministry must take strong actions against the architects of its Covid failure. There must be accountability in a vital sector like healthcare, and it is the duty of the ministry to establish that.

Not just any mistake

CID must answer for flawed investigation in money laundering case

WE are surprised to learn that names of six people were dropped from the charge sheet of a high-profile case over laundering of Tk 2,000 crore filed two years ago. According to our report, the six people were members of a powerful syndicate that used to control the tender bidding process in Faridpur, led by former minister Khandaker Mosharrat Hossain's brother Khandaker Mohtesam Hossain, who is behind bars now. According to locals, police and intelligence sources, the syndicate exercised absolute power during the time when Khandaker Mosharrat became a lawmaker and later a minister. Although some of the accused who were arrested in connection with the case mentioned the six in their confessional statements, CID officials excluded them from the charge sheet. Why?

Since the syndicate's aggressive tender manipulation was known by all in the district, including the police department and local politicians, the dropping of the six big names has raised a lot of questions – not just about the CID report's authenticity but also about what could lead to the police doing that. Was there any kind of pressure or influence? Were the six let off the hook because they were people with political connections? Or was it plain inefficiency on the part of the CID who didn't care to dig deep into the matter?

While the CID officials who investigated the case said that there was a lack of sufficient information about the six people's involvement in the case, three police officials with direct knowledge of the investigation process expressed their suspicion that some of the syndicate members might have been let go in exchange for money. This is a serious allegation, and needs to be investigated properly before the CID decides its next course of action.

Moreover, an investigation by *The Daily Star* also revealed that the six people cleared from the charge sheet had made huge financial gains through the manipulation of tenders worth thousands of crores of taka during the tenure of Mosharrat. What is common among them is that they are all connected to the ruling party and amassed huge wealth over the last several years. They own brick kilns, land, shops, flats, markets, etc. in Faridpur and Dhaka.

Considering this, the case should be reinvestigated and the charge sheet re-submitted in full compliance with the law, as ordered by a Dhaka court recently. Knowing how long it generally takes to do such work in our justice system, we call for quick progress. And those CID officials who made the mistake must be held accountable for "unlawfully" dropping key names from a charge sheet. Equally importantly, the practice of manipulating tenders by syndicates must be stopped at all costs, and corruption in our police force must also be checked.

Why is our public spending on education still so shockingly low?



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SINCE it boosts individual productivity and produces a trained labour force, education is seen as a crucial road to economic progress. However, in most countries, there are clear examples of market failure when it comes to education since, in a free market, education is under-consumed. High market prices of education can prevent individuals from investing in human capital. In this situation, the government's role in allocating resources to education is vital in making up for the failure of markets to support education.

The Sustainable Development Goals (SDG 4) highlights the importance of ensuring inclusive and equitable quality education and promoting lifelong learning opportunities for all. The 8th Five Year Plan of Bangladesh aims to achieve an 8.5 percent growth rate in GDP by 2025. Also, the country is eyeing the possibility of meeting the SDGs' still targets by 2030, aspiring to become an upper-middle income country by 2031, and a developed country by 2041. The success of achieving these goals in Bangladesh critically hinges on the allocation of a substantial amount of public resources to education and its efficient use. However, there are genuine concerns that the current education system in Bangladesh is unable to help in meeting most of these targets.

Where does Bangladesh stand? Even though there has been considerable progress in gross enrolment in primary education, the country is seriously lagging in ensuring quality education for all. If we consider the average years of schooling as an indication of the status of education in any country, in 2019, the average years of schooling in Bangladesh was only 6.2. This was higher than Pakistan (5.2) but lower than India (6.5), and Bangladesh was far behind Sri Lanka (10.6) and Southeast Asian countries like Malaysia (10.4), Vietnam (8.3), Indonesia (8.2), and Thailand (7.9).

Bangladesh had been enjoying macroeconomic stability for a long time in terms of sustained and rising economic growth and keeping the budget deficit at around five percent of GDP. However, this success has come at the cost of very low spending on



Low and inefficient allocation of public resources is negatively affecting the education sector.

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education. Regrettably, Bangladesh has one of the lowest ratios of public expenditure on education to GDP – less than two percent. This is much lower than the averages for LDCs (above three percent), lower middle-income countries (above four percent), upper-middle income countries (above four percent), and high-income countries (above five percent). Bangladesh's public expenditure on education to GDP ratio is even lower than the South Asian average.

There are two specific reasons behind the shockingly low ratio of public expenditure on education to GDP. First, the country has weak state capacity in mobilising tax revenues and thus has insufficient public resources for education. Inefficient tax infrastructure, complex tax laws, poor coverage and corruption are the main causes of low tax collection. Second, even with the low tax-GDP ratio, the country suffers from the problem of not getting its priorities right when it comes to the allocation of public resources for education. Also, due to corrupt practices, a large part of whatever is spent by the government on education doesn't reach the

Bangladesh has a stable anti-reform coalition among dominant actors, which results in a policy paralysis. This can be described as a situation where critically important and necessary laws and reforms are not undertaken or, even if undertaken, not implemented as a result of a lack of commitment from the government or the inability of dominant actors to reach a consensus over the nature of the reform. The policy paralysis is observed through the continued staggeringly low public spending on education, lack of education reforms, high prevalence of mismanagement, corruption, and lack of accountability and transparency.

Bangladesh has a pluralistic education system that is not properly regulated, and consists of different actors with different interests and degrees of power or influence. There is a strong incentive to maintain the status quo where the generation of rents/privileges from the existing system and distribution of such rents/privileges among the influential actors, who have the least interest in reform, perpetuates the so-called stable anti-reform coalition. Thus, political will is a must to break this stable anti-reform

education has been a key element of reform. They understood that for an economy to prosper, its people must have the necessary education, training and skills to support business and prosperity. As a result, since the late 1990s, the government has allocated between 15 and 20 percent of its entire budget to education. The ratio of public expenditure on education to GDP in Vietnam has been more than four percent throughout the last two decades.

However, it is not only the high public spending on education. Critical reforms in the education system also helped Vietnam achieve rapid development in human capital. The country made significant progress in universal primary education, gender equality and adult literacy under the first Education for All (EFA) action plan. The second EFA plan built upon this progress by putting more emphasis on quality than quantity, universal lower-secondary education, lifelong learning, and the enhancement of educational management and resource allocation. Bangladesh can learn from these experiences and take the decision to prioritise education in the same way.

INCREASING EMPLOYMENT OF PEOPLE WITH DISABILITIES

Places of work and education must be made more accessible

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BANGLADESH has long been suffering from lack of employability among its vast population, but this situation is worse for people with disabilities (PWDs), despite the fact that in the modern era, the IT revolution has led to jobs that are less traditionally physical and office-oriented. It is estimated that around 16 million disabled people live in the country, making up almost 10 percent of the population.

PWDs are often socially excluded and treated as outcasts in our society – a scenario that intensifies when the PWD is a woman due to patriarchal notions of a woman's primary role as a caregiver. This is often compounded by the prejudice that disabled women are not able to bear children. On top of that, there is the stigma surrounding disabled children and their mothers, who are held "responsible" for their disability and are often powerless in pushing for their children's education.

Although the prejudice is more intense when it comes to women, all PWDs suffer harshly as the world we live in is inherently "ableist". However, they could be valuable human resources and contribute to the economy if we could only develop their efficiency and skills from the very beginning and create an adjusted work arrangement to make workplaces more accessible

for PWDs.

Employability is a form of social inclusion where PWDs are being neglected. Currently, if you're disabled, getting a job is like looking for a needle in a haystack. Research conducted in Bangladesh among PWDs showed that 70 percent of them were not satisfied or partially satisfied with the accessibility of jobs. As a result, they are often forced to be unemployed and dependent on others, even if they have employable skills. As a result, PWDs can suffer from social and psychological problems, since life satisfaction is correlated with employment, and making economic contributions can lead to acceptance and dignity within families and societies.

However, it is not just poor accessibility in workplaces; PWDs can also face high levels of direct discrimination in their workplace. They are often passed over for promotions and easily considered unworthy of more senior positions. Unfair wage rates, bullying and harassment are other common issues that a disabled person faces at work in Bangladesh. These are likely to be one of the main reasons for most Bangladeshi PWDs being self-employed, but they can face discrimination from buyers of their products or services too.

We can look to other countries to

find how they have included PWDs in their economy. For example, the German government has more than 40 specialties for training disabled people for professions such as trade, wood and metal processing. They have also trained PWDs in the basics of programming, radio engineering and electronics. All work arrangements in Germany for disabled people are done in compliance with ergonomics aspects to get the best work efficiency. But it is a matter of great sorrow that such work arrangements are a mere dream in our country.

It is a formidable task to ensure a financially secure and dignified lifestyle for PWDs without practical efforts to create an adaptable workplace for them. One adjustment could be to design tasks in a way that PWDs can perform in their condition. In this regard, ergonomics can be the best solution, but this is often neglected in Bangladesh. Ergonomics is the process of arranging a workplace to make it more suitable for the people working in it. Ground floor facilities, wheelchair accessibility, adapted equipment and timing, and disability-friendly training modules are some of the facilities that organisations can provide. Accessibility is equally important for educational institutions, which only a few Bangladeshi universities have so far, such as University of Dhaka, University of Chittagong, Rajshahi University, and BRAC University.

Before, there was a 10 percent quota on government jobs for people with disabilities, but this ended with the abolishing of the quota system.

Although the government has announced there will be a quota for PWDs in future recruitment, we had seen before how a lack of clarity on the term "disability" made this mostly futile. Additionally, this will not suffice for the large number of disabled people we have. In the most recent fiscal budget, the allocation for disabled people was a mere 0.37 percent, and 2.07 percent of the safety net budget. So without public spending, without opportunities for work, and without accessible educational institutes and workplaces, how can PWDs have a chance of earning their own livelihoods and living with dignity and respect?

It is high time that every workplace in different industries, such as banking, RMG, farming, tourism, pharmaceuticals, textiles and so on, focus on including PWDs in their institutions. Along with creating an accessible and adjusted workplace, adequate job training and the creation of modified jobs in mainstream industries might be the changes they need for their employment. Due to the pandemic, the digital economy has been blooming, and technological training for PWDs could boost their employability in tech-oriented jobs. Freelancing jobs could also turn PWDs into assets. Given that the number of disabled persons in the country is increasing for a number of reasons, including deaths in road crashes, it is high time for us to at least begin to have conversations on how to increase the employability of people with disabilities in Bangladesh.