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Is EC up to the task?

Its proposal about journalists is laudable, but there's a lot more to be done

THE fact that an election commissioner has said that journalists are the "eyes and ears" of the Election Commission is music to our ears. We are even more pleased that his words were followed up with action, as the EC has proposed to the law ministry that a provision be added to the relevant law that will protect journalists covering elections. The EC wants a penalty of up to three years in jail as well as a fine for obstruction of the duties of journalists.

The role that the media plays in elections has become very crucial in recent years, with growing concerns that citizens are not being able to exercise their right to participate in free and fair elections. Despite the violence that has marred polls in almost every corner of the country over the years – the latest of which saw a 10-month-old toddler killed during Union Parishad elections in Thakurgaon – journalists continued to do their job to keep the nation informed about election-related developments.

This, however, has not been easy. There have been repeated instances of attacks on journalists by candidates and their supporters. Despite the special identity cards that are issued by the EC to facilitate election coverage, journalists have been stopped from entering polling stations, including by members of law enforcement agencies. There have even been instances of journalists being arrested under the controversial Digital Security Act for reporting on election irregularities. Therefore, we applaud the EC for taking steps to protect journalists, and we hope that this provision will be approved and codified into law as speedily as possible.

According to a report by this daily, the proposal includes giving the EC the power to cancel polls, and the presiding officer the power to close polls. The EC already has enough authority to take drastic action if any complaint is received during polling. However, in recent times, we have rarely seen it take steps when such complaints are received, or even when electoral codes of conduct are openly flouted, such as when a ruling party MP continued to campaign for a mayoral candidate in Cumilla even after the EC "requested" him to leave his constituency. So, how can we be sure that the EC will be tough on such electoral irregularities, including obstructing journalists, when the time comes? How can we be sure that this new provision will not be arbitrarily used? Clearly, the EC – because of how it handled its affairs so far, including authorising the use of EVMS despite objections from many parties – has a credibility issue of its own making.

So while we commend the step to protect journalists, we think it cannot exist in isolation from other measures that must be put into place to ensure fair and safe elections. The EC must prove itself up to the task.

The time of denial is over

CAG finding on DG Food irregularities must be investigated

AFTER every unflattering media portrayal of government offices or officers, the standard response that trips off their tongue is either flat denial – calling such reports "fabricated" – or, more conveniently, silence. But how will they defend themselves against accusations from the government's own oversight institutions? Over the past two weeks or so, *The Daily Star* has exposed the contents of a number of audit reports by the Comptroller and Auditor General (CAG), opening up a rather big can of worms. In all of them, different offices of the government were flagged for major financial irregularities.

The latest such report to come to our notice is on the Directorate General of Food. In it, the CAG raised objections about financial anomalies involving the distribution of 70,035 tonnes of rice through Open Market Sale (OMS) in FY 2019-20. The food directorate apparently sold the rice worth Tk 59.33 crore to OMS dealers, but didn't deposit the money with the public exchequer. Where did the money go then? Despite the DG Food's attempt to rubbish the CAG's reasoning as "inappropriate", the fact is, it is the directorate's responsibility to ensure that proceeds from OMS sales are duly deposited with the treasury and to keep a record as per the 2015 OMS policy, which it failed to show.

This, we must say, has tainted an otherwise noble initiative meant to help poor people cushion the blow of Covid-induced lockdown across the country. There have been other audit objections as well. For example, of the 20,266 tonnes of rice allocated for Dhaka division, around 1,000 were not sold at all to the target groups. There have been also instances of OMS security fees from Dhaka dealers remaining unclaimed for more than three years, collecting lower security fees than stipulated in the OMS policy, or not collecting it at all. The directorate also couldn't produce 198 muster rolls containing details on the sale of 973.65 tonnes of rice by three of its offices, although it is necessary to maintain such records.

This is a pretty damning indictment and should be investigated properly. Unfortunately, so far, the authorities have shown little interest in following up on reports of Covid-time irregularities when published in the media. Irregularities of this kind were found not just in subsidised food distribution or listing of beneficiaries for relief packages, but in many other sectors as well. The CAG audit objections only confirm that those media reports were anything but fabricated. They show us how widespread corruption has been during and before the Covid period, including in the health directorate, public hospitals, the ministries of agriculture and fisheries and livestock, etc.

How will the authorities respond now? Will they continue to be in denial mode? We urge the government to take stern actions to make its offices and officers accountable.

Is education another commodity in the market?



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MANZOOR AHMED

INFLATION caused by economic fallout from the Covid-19 pandemic and the Russia-Ukraine war, on top of income loss, poses a new challenge for those already struggling in the low- and middle-income categories. Added to their woes is the rising costs of their children's education.

Costs have jumped by 50-100 percent for school supplies and private tutoring, which have now become unavoidable for anxious parents concerned about their children's future. This newspaper recently raised the question: "Why are our schools failing to provide complete education to our children?" It urges the government to check the rising prices of school supplies and investigate if the hike in prices is caused by unscrupulous syndicates exploiting the ongoing inflation.

The important issue that must be discussed is whether school education should continue to be another commodity subject to the vagaries of the market. An alternative and more appropriate scenario is that school education of acceptable quality is recognised as an entitlement for all children, which the state is obligated to guarantee through public institutions or in collaborative arrangements with non-state providers. Although some components of the education system may take the form of commercial services, national pledges and international agreements require that school education not be regarded as a consumption item.

Article 17 of our constitution says that the state shall establish "a uniform, mass-oriented and universal system of education extending free and compulsory education to all children to such (a) stage as may be determined by law." A law was adopted in 1989 to provide free and compulsory primary education up to Class 5. Meanwhile, the global education goal under the Sustainable Development Goals (SDG) agenda requires that inclusive and equitable quality secondary education should be free and universal by 2030 –



FILE PHOTO: STAR

Costs have jumped by 50-100 percent for school supplies and private tutoring

a goal Bangladesh has endorsed.

However, as of today, primary education is neither free nor really compulsory. Look at all the children who are not enrolled or are dropouts, and the various officially sanctioned and unsanctioned costs to parents, including the cost of private tutoring, because schools do not do their job properly. And there is no plan or target yet for achieving free and universal secondary education at least up to Class 10 by 2030.

The existence of three major types of schools in our system is divisive and runs along the social class line. The general Bangla medium schools, state-run and state-assisted, serve the low- and middle-income population; the madrasas – state-supported Alia and independent Qawmi – cater to the poor; and the English medium schools, the elite and mushrooming ones, low-quality "kindergarten" schools, are for the children of the rich and the relatively privileged. Students in these three types of schools may as well live and grow up on different planets, with their largely separate curricula, school experience, and ambitions in life.

The rising costs of living and education have hit all, but the hardest

hit are students of mainstream Bangla medium schools, who make up two-thirds of the student population of about 40 million. Girls always become more vulnerable than boys when their families face a crunch, economic or otherwise.

The National Education Policy, 2010 recognised the divisive and inequitable character of our school system that

traffic cannot be the main rationale for having a quality school in every neighbourhood, and it cannot be just for the capital city. We have yet to hear of a mega-plan for building a nationwide network of neighbourhood schools in which children will be eager to be enrolled.

The larger question of building a K-12 school system consistent with the goal of an aspiring higher middle-income country and meeting the constitutional responsibility for children's education has remained confined to rhetorical statements by decision-makers. Concerned citizens and educators have spoken about a comprehensive national sector plan for education, revisiting the 2010 education policy in the context of 21st-century challenges. This effort could be guided by a permanent statutory education commission answerable to the public and the parliament, as recommended in the education policy.

Incidentally, the result of an exercise undertaken in 2020 at the behest of Unesco and the Global Partnership for Education (GPE) remains on the GPE website as a draft document. It has evinced little interest of the two education ministries in the country, even though their officials have participated in the exercise.

Meanwhile, children's education remains a tradable commodity, the costs rising with inflation, and subject to forces of market exploitation, which the government can do little to control. As a post Covid education recovery measure, the government could provide some relief to beleaguered parents by providing financial assistance to all registered schools – government, government-assisted and private – to provide support for the students' educational supplies and extra lessons organised by schools, reducing the need for private tutoring. The government could also cap or eliminate various student fees. These measures have been recommended by the Education Watch and in education discourse as requirements of a learning loss recovery plan.

These necessary interim steps are not substitutes for addressing the larger question of an education sector plan reflecting medium- and longer-term aims and a good-faith effort to implement it. But for now, these will help the parents who are struggling to keep their children in school.

Why the gender gap in our workforce?



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SAYKAT BISWAS

ACCORDING to the Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics (BBS), approximately eight million Bangladeshi nationals, aged 15-24 years, are not in employment, education, or training (NEET). A study by the International Labour Organization (ILO) says 40 percent of Bangladeshi youths are part of the NEET population. The situation is more precarious for women. Bangladesh, with a score of 0.70, has the largest gender gap in the workforce among South Asian countries, according to the World Economic Forum (WEF). The most recent data from the SDG tracker indicates that in Bangladesh, approximately 47 percent of young women and 10 percent of young men are NEET. All these indicators show that the country's youth, particularly women, have a low participation rate in the labour force.

In order to reduce the gender gap and increase the overall number of young people in the workforce, the government has embarked on an ambitious plan to provide skills training to 1.9 million young people, 30 percent of whom are expected to be in the entrepreneurial sector. To do so, the government has been allocating resources for human development, forging public-private partnerships, strengthening the link between training and the job market, creating employment opportunities, and encouraging the growth of businesses. Consequently, women's labour force participation in Bangladesh rose from

24 percent in 2000 to 36 percent in 2020, according to the BBS report.

Even though the small- and medium-sized enterprise (SME) sector employs over 7.8 million people directly, it indirectly supports approximately 32.2 million people. A sizeable portion of owners in the SME sector, which accounts for one-fourth of the country's GDP, are women. However, female entrepreneurs in this industry face numerous impediments, which have been exacerbated by the Covid-19 pandemic.

According to the Centre for Policy Dialogue (CPD), after the pandemic broke out, only 49 percent of the 70 cottage, micro, small and medium enterprises (CMSMEs) owned by women in Bangladesh remained operational. In contrast, 41 percent were forced to shut down entirely. The study also revealed that 23 percent of female-owned CMSMEs cut down employee salaries by approximately 25 percent, while 44 percent were unable to pay their rent. According to a Brac survey of 589 female business owners, 90 percent experienced difficulties due to the pandemic, and 41 percent were compelled to lay off employees as a result of a sharp decline in income. The study also revealed that one-third of the respondents were unable to operate their businesses during the pandemic, and two-thirds had no source of income.

However, to assist women in the CMSME sector in regaining their footing after suffering Covid-induced

setbacks, it is necessary to first identify the most common issues that they encounter. The difficulty of getting finance is one of the biggest obstacles female CMSME owners face. Existing business owners have difficulty expanding their companies, whereas women who aspire to become entrepreneurs lack the capital to launch their businesses. The high interest rate is another barrier, since bank loan rates typically range from seven to nine percent, and often exceed 41.1 percent. Furthermore, some banks and non-profit organisations have strict lending rules that many women cannot meet because they lack the necessary paperwork, making it difficult for them to obtain loans.

Another roadblock is the lack of information about the government's stimulus schemes. According to a Brac survey, four in every five female business owners are not aware of these programmes. Although funds under these schemes are intended to be disbursed quickly, there are stringent regulatory requirements. The patriarchal mindset is an additional problem. To expedite loan processing, women business owners are frequently advised to hire men, which is unfeasible for some and demoralising for many.

However, there are ways to get past these challenges. A seven-percent interest cap on bank loans could make borrowing and repaying money easier. Furthermore, since many home-based female entrepreneurs lack the necessary legal documentation for their businesses, the eligibility requirements and regulatory procedures should be made flexible. Because of Covid, they have been forced to use e-commerce and f-commerce. Therefore, mobile banking services and online payment gateways should have lower fees for them. In addition, female CMSME owners should be provided with necessary IT training and then be connected to reliable

e-commerce platforms in order to maximise benefits. They should also be insured so they can recoup, should there be any natural or human-made disasters.

On the other hand, the interest rate on government stimulus packages should be either zero or nominal, and loan repayment terms should be extended. "Tailor-made financing packages" should be developed as well, considering the unique constraints faced by female entrepreneurs in Bangladesh. Since public representatives tend to be biased in enlisting eligible women entrepreneurs for government stimulus packages, business associations that work for and with the CMSME owners may recommend a list of eligible beneficiaries. They can also disseminate the information in their respective databases.

In addition to increasing financial access, it is important to develop women entrepreneurs' abilities to effectively manage loans and increase their long-term business viability. They may benefit from a thorough training course that covers all key competencies. The government can collaborate with non-government organisations and private partners to contextualise and scale up the training package to maximise its reach and effectiveness.

Development will be sustainable if actions to achieve that are inclusive, pertinent, and timely. Putting girls and women on the periphery of the development process is akin to having two eyes but only seeing with one. If we want to achieve the goal set by the Ministry of Youth and Sports to reduce the number of NEETs from 28.2 percent to three percent between 2015 and 2030, we must upskill and expand financial opportunities for our women entrepreneurs.