

The Daily Star

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An unbreakable cycle

High cost of living is nullifying the effects of small gains in price control

It is said that a rising tide lifts all boats. Generally, it means that improvements in the general economy benefit all participants in that economy. Although high-income earners stand to gain more from an improved economy, the effect trickles down to everyone eventually. But this theory comes with a caveat in present-day Bangladesh: a rising tide can sink all boats, too. Think of it in terms of our extremely high cost of living. So sweeping is its impact that, in the absence of comprehensive regulatory efforts, not only does it increase the prices of all products/services, but it can also nullify the effects of small, isolated gains in price control.

A recent report by this daily offers an example of the sinking effects of this cost-of-living crisis. It shows how retail vendors in the capital, despite getting green papaya at low prices at the wholesale level, are being "forced" to sell it at high prices. After tracking its journey from Manikganj's Singair upazila to Dhaka's Kazipara, our reporters found that the price of one kilo had more than tripled - from Tk 7 to Tk 25 - during the 25-kilometre transit, after changing hands three times. It is at the retail level that the price was seen to shoot up, with the vendors buying one kilo at Tk 8.50 but selling it at Tk 25. These figures may vary, of course. But you get an idea of how prices increase sometimes.

The vendors may be the guilty party in this case, but there are transport expenses to be paid and bribes to be given. In the end, however, their motivation for higher profits is the same as the motivation of customers for lower prices: staying afloat in the rising tide covering the costs of everything - from every essential item in the market, to the utilities, to transport fares, to healthcare, to education, the list goes on. As one vendor said: "Even five years ago, we did not need to make such a profit as daily expenses were not so high. But these days, even if I buy the papayas for Tk 2 per kilo, I will not be able to sell them for under Tk 15." He then added: "My family solely depends on my income, and if I cannot earn Tk 1,000 a day, I will fail to put food on my table and ensure my children's schooling."

Small-scale vendors are, however, small fries in a sea of sharks that are actually the architects of today's cost-of-living crisis. Big importers, hoarders, corrupt policymakers, bureaucrats. They are the reason why the downward trend in the winter kitchen market doesn't feel like a victory, with the price of everything else stuck at pre-winter levels. Can we expect increased food production or imports to bring relief if a supportive environment is not created? Can we expect the consumer market to stabilise without an effective oversight? Can inflation be outpaced without higher wages/incomes across the board?

We urge the government to take the high cost of living with the urgency it deserves, and form a comprehensive plan to tackle it through necessary policies and interventions.

Biman job scams must be checked

If top officials were involved in leaking questions, they should be brought to book

October 21 must have been an embarrassing day for Bangladesh Biman. A recruitment examination for electricians, mechanics, welders, painters, operators, and tailors was suspended on that day when allegations of a question paper leak were brought to the fore. A report from this daily suggests that the leak was orchestrated not just by some lower-level officials, but the top brass of the organisation was also involved in it. Soon after the suspension of the examination, the Ministry of Tourism and Civil Aviation formed a probe committee. However, the committee was answerable to the managing director of Biman, and hence the latter was not even questioned during the investigation.

However, we're told that an army major who serves as general manager of the ground service equipment department, and also as general manager of the security department, was alleged to have been responsible for the leak, at least in part, according to confessional statements given by three different Biman motor transport operators. He was dubiously included in the committee formed to prepare the question paper along with two others, potentially to influence decision-making. In his confession, the major's driver said that he had handed him a set of question papers on the day before the recruitment test.

This story isn't really about low-level Biman officials who sold recruitment exam question papers, although their involvement shouldn't be discounted. But it's about the big fish and how they worked out a complex scheme over several months to ensure that the right people were present at the right moment to oversee a scam. Sadly, in most cases of corruption involving public institutions, the puppet masters in suits always remain behind the curtain and unaccountable, while it is the "mules" who end up in jail.

This is not an isolated incident of irregularities at Biman. News of the hiring of "controversial" and "underqualified" people as pilots and co-pilots came to the media a few months ago. An investigation report by an intelligence agency highlighted the scam in the hiring process. The airline carrier apparently ignored its own resources and appointed pilots from other airlines, most of whom had either been sacked or denied promotions due to a lack of skills, the report observed.

These kinds of irregularities in the recruitment processes - from leaking question papers to hiring substandard pilots - are inexcusable. Biman carries the flag of Bangladesh and should, therefore, uphold the highest integrity and professionalism possible. We urge the higher authorities to ensure that no party involved in the recruitment scams is spared. The lack of basic accountability and efficiency that Biman continues to exhibit every now and then must be checked. Critical reforms are necessary for Biman to make sure these kinds of irregularities are not repeated, and that the airline performs in a way that represents the dignity and pride of our nation.

How much have we achieved in eliminating gender-based violence?



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Bangladesh boasts a long history of activism to end discrimination and violence against women and girls. Since the last 20 years, men and boys have also joined as partners to address this issue, which is the most significant manifestation of the inferior position of women and girls in our society.

However, in spite of the activism, increased partnerships and awareness, violence continues unabated in the private and public domains in the form of rape, gang rape, early marriage, and sexual harassment.

As per information compiled by Manusher Jonno Foundation (MJF), between January and October 2022, 505 children experienced sexual violence, while Ain o Salish Kendra (ASK) documented rape cases of 830 women. Moreover, as per a survey conducted by Girl Child Advocacy Forum, from January to September, at least 2,300 girls fell victim to child marriage, which is an astounding 288 such illegal marriages per month.

But these are reported cases and only the tip of the iceberg. What about the unreported ones? What about incest, the crime that is committed inside homes everyday by close relatives, which thrives in a culture of secrecy and taboo? Unfortunately, even the vibrant women's movement has not been able to touch on this subject due to cultural sensitivity.

A recent scoping study commissioned by MJF on child abuse and neglect revealed that around 90 percent of children, both boys and girls, suffered sexual and other forms of violence in their homes. The report gives a snapshot of the reality, one which we are still not willing to face or address.

The #MeToo campaign shook the world and brought to light the misogyny and sexual abuse in high society and the celebrity world, especially in western countries. High profile and iconic figures had to face trial and punishment. But what happened in our part of the world? The campaign was greeted with disdain. In other words, sexual abuse at home remains an unspeakable subject and victims continue to suffer in silence.

The truth of the matter is that "nobody really cares," except, of course, those individually affected by it. Otherwise, how does one explain the complete apathy of the institutions



COLLAGE: KAZI TAHSIN AGAZ APURBO

entrusted with preventing such violence?

Bangladesh is credited with some of the most progressive policies to address violence against women and girls (VAWG). We also have national Action Plans to prevent VAWG and child marriage, painstakingly drawn up with inputs from some of the most well-known gender experts in the country. Institutions from union parishads up to district-level ones have been given responsibilities and have also been empowered to take action. And yet, the system does not work.

This is not to say the system does not work everywhere. We have found excellent examples of dedicated government officials who have stopped scores of child marriages or have taken action against perpetrators of rape and assault. Unfortunately, those jailed for such crimes are out on bail thanks to loopholes in the system or due to political patronage.

But so much for the systems and institutions. What does the rising violence against our women, children, and girls say about our society? What message are we giving to our children, youth, and men in general? Do we ever

teach our youth that being male does not make them a superior being or that they are not actually born with aggressive dominating behaviour? It is the socialising they get at home, school, and from society that makes them act and behave the way they do. Which brings us to the upbringing that children receive in families. As long as boys are treated as the preferred

their contribution to be negligible. Highlighting women's contributions can be a strategy to make families and society aware of the critical role they play in maintaining the care economy and well-being of their families. In this respect, advocacy for the formal recognition of women's unpaid care work is an urgent need.

The other important issue that needs

offspring, patriarchy will remain entrenched and manifest itself in such perverted actions.

Another important point that is mostly ignored is, patriarchy negatively impacts men, too, as they face undue pressure to be the main bread-earners for the family and to take on all familial responsibilities. Thus, they showcase traits such as dominance, arrogance, and aggression. Women, on the other hand, are not taught to rebel, take charge or protest, leaving them with lower levels of self-worth and confidence.

Another area of gross violence against girls is child marriage. At 51 percent, as per a Unicef report, it is one of the highest in the world, a national shame given the prime minister's personal commitment to girls' education. Using the excuse of income loss and closure of schools, thousands of girls below the legal age of 18 were married off during Covid-19 pandemic-induced lockdowns. The nation was shocked at the high rates of absence of girls in 9th and 10th grades once schools reopened in September 2021.

VAWG is a symptom of a wider mindset of society that believes women to be inferior to men and considers

to be addressed is our justice system. It is nearly impossible for victims of sexual violence to get justice as the conviction rate for such cases is between two to three percent - meaning 97 percent of perpetrators believe that they will get away. VAWG thrives in a system where people are not held to account for negligence of duty because bribes, extortion, and misuse of power determine the outcome of cases filed for rape and sexual assault.

The parliament, in a bold move, recently dropped the section of the Evidence Act that allowed the defence to question the character of a rape victim. This is a welcome move and will give confidence to victims to pursue their cases. There are a number of such flawed laws that inhibit women from getting justice and they need to be changed, too.

However, we do rejoice at the success our girls and women have achieved in the last 50 years. The glass ceiling is slowly breaking and women are making forays into areas that were unthinkable a few years ago. And that is why it is so critical to address and take steps to prevent gender-based violence, so that our women and girls are able to live with the freedom and security they deserve.

In a time of crisis, global leaders have failed us



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Many of the models, both economic and forecasting, had until recently assumed that the new economic order ushered in at the end of the last century would last for a few more decades. How quickly things have changed!

"There is a level of weaponising the economy that we have not seen for, perhaps, decades," said Adam Posen, president of the Peterson Institute for International Economics. "You've got G20 economies actively trying to harm other G20 economies."

Countries in Southeast Asia had until recently taken for granted a stable relationship between China and the US to preserve their own prosperity. Now, there is renewed fear that the conflict between the US and the Russia-China bloc would lead to collateral damage by disrupting the global economic and political ecosystem.

How can Bangladesh prepare itself for this change? In the world of business, one has to constantly take into consideration uncertainty by building up various "what-if?" scenarios. Fortunately, in the realm of strategic planning, we have tools that are quite sophisticated and are driven by artificial intelligence and predictive analytics.

To provide an example, the PM's advisers need to consider various

future possibilities to better position ourselves for the coming years. We need to ask, how much longer is the war in Ukraine going to last? What are the chances of large-scale climate change effects, including internal migration? How might the vicissitudes of global demand for our exports impact domestic industries? What about the record level of inflation? And how is that going to impact our industries and our suppliers?

Our think-tanks and government research institutions need to think about not just our short- and medium-term balance of payments and foreign exchange reserves, but also look at all of these other factors, and be able to assess risks and plan accordingly.

Even the financial world is now coming to terms with the chaotic situation unleashed by the global superpower rivalry. The Wall Street Journal sounded the alarm earlier this month. "The Messy Unwinding of The New World Order" was the headline, where it identified trade conflict, rising inflation, and global tension as key factors that have led to the current situation in which developing economies are facing collateral damages.

And things are unlikely to get any better soon. World inflation is expected

to jump from the 3.8 percent of 2019 to 6.8 percent in 2022. The world economy is headed for a recession in the coming months. The average recession is about 10-12 months long. Supply chain disruptions, already in their third year, could be prolonged for another 12-18 months. The business world everywhere has begun to factor this into their planning and risk analysis, and so should Bangladesh.

At the G20 summit in Bali, Indonesia, earlier this month, the heads of state of the two largest economies in the world offered divergent visions of the future. China's Xi warned, "Drawing ideological lines or promoting group politics and bloc confrontation will only divide the world and hinder global development and human progress."

President Biden, on the other hand, pushed the US agenda in an effort to reinforce US leadership and said that "the US is more prepared than any other country in the world, economically and politically, to deal with the changing circumstances around the world." His Secretary of the Treasury, Janet Yellen, was more direct: "Our motives are to hold down Russia's revenues to impede its ability to fight the war."

Others were watching in frustration as the two leaders were jockeying for positions in the global leadership race. "We should not divide the world into parts. We must not allow the world to fall into another world war," said President Joko Widodo of Indonesia.

What can countries and businesses do to protect themselves from the external forces and events that lead to systemic risks such as inflation, wars, extreme climate, or a prolonged recession? What can governments do in regards to climate change and

climate mitigation measures?

The government can make contingency plans, and build climate-resistant infrastructure. It must invest in projects that offer the climate migrants housing and employment opportunities, and do a better job at planning for the correct levels of demand for human services.

What can global leaders do? The US and China are both aware of the negative effects of their anti-inflationary policy and zero-tolerance approach to Covid, respectively, for the poorer countries which have economic ties with one or the other or with both. But their attitude so far has been, "Sorry, but we can't do much about it."

US Secretary Yellen dismisses these as "spillover effects." Eswar Prasad, a professor of trade policy at Cornell University, retorted, "Indians acknowledge that the Fed needs to do what the Fed needs to do, but there is some resentment that the US monetary policy is creating a lot of complications for India."

Another area of concern is how the rise in US interest rates is slowing consumer demand, and US imports fell sharply in the third quarter. It also triggers a flow of international capital away from developing countries and into US bonds and banks.

As Bangladesh's experience shows, this outflow drives down the value of the local currency against the US dollar, raising the price of everything from food, oil, and other commodities priced in dollars. The debt burden also increases. Then, if our central banks in turn raise the interest rate to limit the decline in their own currencies, economic growth can be affected.