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What is killing our migrant workers abroad?

Bangladeshi authorities must hold destination countries accountable

Perhaps one of the most concerning issues ailing the country, that is too often swept under the rug, is the unnaturally high number of Bangladeshi migrant workers who die in Gulf countries and return to us as corpses. A report published by this daily on Sunday, to mark International Migrants Day, has revealed that the bodies of at least 45,301 male and female migrant workers arrived in the country between 2008 and June of this year. Among the six destination countries – Saudi Arabia (KSA), United Arab Emirates (UAE), Oman, Kuwait, Bahrain, and Qatar – a staggering 12,930 deaths have taken place in Saudi Arabia alone. While the deaths of migrant workers in Qatar have been highlighted as a human rights issue over the past month, given the country's lavish hosting of the 2022 FIFA World Cup using infrastructures largely built by migrant workers, other Gulf countries must also receive their share of the criticism.

The question that is foremost in our minds is: how do so many Bangladeshi workers die in these destination countries? While a few workers die by suicide or are killed, the causes of death mentioned most often – as per documents that accompany their bodies – are strokes and heart diseases, alongside workplace accidents. The curious thing is that a large portion of those who have died of strokes were young, or at most middle-aged. Unfortunately, there have been no attempts to investigate and publicise the underlying causes of migrant worker deaths by the host countries.

Given the degree of reporting on the issue over the years and the narratives of migrant workers and their families, it is no secret that the working and living environments in destination countries are horrid. Not only are temperatures much higher than in Bangladesh, the work hours can extend to 12 or even 18 hours, while workers are always under pressure to send enough money home, leaving no opportunity for them to have enough rest – let alone any leisure. Given the lack of enforcement of any workers' rights, most Bangladeshis are also forced to do risky, often life-threatening jobs. Not to mention how badly some workers are treated, especially women migrants who work informal jobs in homes, becoming victims of verbal, physical, and/or sexual abuse, or even murder.

Ultimately, it all boils down to the fact that Bangladeshis and workers from other origin countries are severely exploited by the Gulf states. The lack of transparency on the destination countries' part regarding worker treatment, coupled with the lack of enthusiasm of origin countries to hold them accountable has resulted in Bangladeshi migrant workers having to earn their bread in inhumane conditions, away from everything they know and everyone they love. Unfortunately, it is often seen that Gulf countries hold a higher ground as they can choose to take in more workers from other countries if one origin country imposes stricter conditions for their citizens.

We demand that Bangladeshi authorities at home and in destination countries prioritise the lives of migrant workers. These are the people on whose labour and remittances our economy is dependent. So why is their well-being not given the utmost importance? The sight of families receiving the bodies of their loved ones, who have died in destination countries while trying to provide them with a steady income, needs to stop being a regular thing.

A World Cup like no other

Ultimately, the real winners are the billions of football fans across the globe

The 2022 World Cup final, which ended in a dramatic victory for Argentina in the dreaded penalty shootout, produced the most fitting end to what has been a thrilling tournament. Despite all the excitement – and the controversies – in the lead up to the World Cup in Qatar, no one could have expected the tournament to pan out this well. So, first and foremost, the organisers deserve kudos for doing a superb job. The Qatari authorities and people also deserve appreciation for hosting the tournament so graciously, and for opening up their doors to the entire world in such a welcoming manner.

Like all football World Cups, this one, too, captured the imagination of the whole world – and we have to say that the players did not disappoint fans' expectations. In fact, given the quality of the matches, and the football played by all teams, fans around the world have been more than satisfied by the grit, determination, and overall performance that were on display. The spirit shown by players from different teams, both in victory and defeat, has been fantastic to watch. And that is what football should be all about.

Throughout the tournament, fans were on the edge of their seats, as teams that were not as highly touted, such as Morocco, Croatia and others, pulled off a number of awe-inspiring upsets against some of the traditionally strong teams. But ultimately, it was the two footballing giants, Argentina and France, that made it through to the final. And what a final it was. Already being described by some as one of the greatest football matches of all time, it produced some of the best footballing moments in recent history. The two superstars in opposing teams, Lionel Messi and Kylian Mbappe, surely saved their best for last. But ultimately, it was Messi's Argentina that edged out Kylian Mbappe's France in the most dramatic fashion.

But the French players deserve to hold their heads up high, even in defeat, as they pulled off not one but two inspiring comebacks to push the Argentine team to its limits. However, in a fairy-tale ending, Argentina proved that they were destined to be the victors of this World Cup. And that has surely brought much joy to thousands of Bangladeshis, who have been among the most passionate supporters of the South American nation in the world.

From Morocco's great run to become the first African team to ever make it to a World Cup semi-final, to Portugal's Cristiano Ronaldo becoming the first man to score at five FIFA World Cups, to Saudi Arabia breaking Argentina's 36 match unbeaten streak in one of the biggest World Cup upsets of all time, to Mbappe becoming only the second player ever to score a hat-trick in a World Cup final, to Lionel Messi breaking Gabriel Batistuta's record to become Argentina's all-time leading goal scorer on route to ultimately lifting the trophy, there is no doubt that the real winners of the tournament have been the billions of fans around the world.

Curbing BEREC's authority sets us up for more trouble



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On December 1, the government issued an amendment to the Bangladesh Energy Regulatory Commission (BERC) Act, 2003, empowering the power and energy ministry to set fuel and electricity prices under special circumstances. Previously, according to the law, the prices of energy commodities could only be fixed by BERC. This amendment thus alters BERC's position as the sole authority for fixing energy prices in the country.

The idea of a regulatory commission for checks and balances in the energy sector has come about from the well-known Federal Energy Regulatory Commission (FERC) of the US. Over the last two decades, many countries have adopted the idea of an authority to oversee the investments made in their energy sectors – to check if these are consistent with their national goals. In recent times, advocating investments to comply with the mandates of the Paris Agreement on climate change is one of the newer roles of such authorities. In addition to ensuring smooth and affordable energy supply and monitoring energy infrastructure investments, many countries have entrusted these commissions with the role of setting fuel and power tariffs. Since investments made in the energy sector have a direct impact on the tariffs, clearance from the regulatory commission in this regard is extremely important to keep the tariffs low.

BERC's vision is "to create an enabling environment, efficient, well-managed and sustainable energy sector in Bangladesh for providing energy at (a) just and reasonable cost, and protection of consumers' interest and satisfaction through fair practice." Among BERC's many missions are "transparency in energy sector management, cost rationalisation and tariff determination, and enforcement of fiscal discipline in the energy sector." In light of this, the amendment raises several questions: why did the government do it? And how will it impact BERC's key role of tariff determination as set out in its mandate?



The quick and simple answer to the first question is that the government wants to have FULL control over fuel and electricity prices. The emphasis on the word "full" is important because the government already had a fair bit of control over BERC through the process of key appointments and other means. It should also be noted that the government never gave the function of tariff setting for petroleum products to BERC. As a result, the prices of diesel and petrol could be revised whenever the government desired.

To understand why it was important for the government to introduce this amendment, one needs to understand the present mechanism of price fixation. To set energy prices, the government set up BERC as an independent body in 2003; its chairman and members were appointed by the parliament and they were given judicial powers. This commission would set the price of energy (mainly gas and electricity) without any interference from the government, using calculations and formulas following certain guidelines. One very important clause in the guidelines is that the commission *must* hold a public hearing before setting

prices. Of paramount importance in the functioning of BERC is the sacred task of protecting consumers.

Before BERC was set up, tariff fixing was done by the ministry with support from the utilities – Petrobangla for gas and Bangladesh Power Development Board (BPDB) for electricity. The problem in this process is three-fold: 1) they may arbitrarily set high prices

and try to earn revenue; 2) the process is not transparent, especially for consumers, whose opinions are not considered; and 3) those responsible for supplying the energy may be doing so in an inefficient manner and making investments that are contrary to lower energy prices.

Following its establishment, BERC had the sole authority to set energy prices; if the government wanted to increase energy prices, they would have to go through BERC, who would first conduct a public hearing to solicit public opinion. It was expected that, through this process, consumers would be able to vent their grievances against utilities and in the process scrutinise their efficiency of operation. BERC was also tasked with closely scrutinising the tariff increase requests before declaring a new tariff. The entire process could take as long as six months, and in most cases the utilities would not get the price increase they asked for.

In this situation, every day that BERC would take to deliberate on the requests would add to the mounting losses. Since BERC needed to follow due process, they were not in a position to hasten their deliberations. In situations where the tariff increase requested

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Why are women still missing from the news?



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SARWAT TARANNUM NADIA

These days, there seems to be a perception that we no longer need to talk about gender equality in our day-to-day lives. Those who still try to bring up the issue are usually the activists, development workers or the designated government officials responsible for women's affairs. And obviously, there is a common misperception that women are being given more – and often "undeserved" – opportunities, and that they are not worthy of having equal rights as their male counterparts. Any other gender identity, outside of the male-female dichotomies, are not even mentioned.

Recently, MRDI, a leading media development organisation in Bangladesh, conducted a brief media monitoring on gender representation during 16 Days of Activism against Gender-Based Violence campaign. Though it was only a seven-day-long monitoring of news content in 10 selected news outlets, the exercise provided us with a snapshot of the greater media landscape.

With more than 5,000 news write-ups monitored in those seven days, women were present only in 14 percent of said content – be it as the subject of the content, or as mentioned, quoted, interviewed in any way, and if the stories are concerned with gender issues. And if we look at women as content creators, only eight percent of the articles (with by-line, features and op-eds) were produced by women.

In a country where women outnumber men in the total population (according to the latest

census in June 2022), how is this still the state of affairs?

Of course, there are understandable reasons behind these findings. A recent study, also conducted by the MRDI as a part of a global research by FOJO Media Institute, Sweden, reveals the big gap between male and female journalists. Although it is difficult to find the actual ratio as there is no official count of journalists, we can

mentioned that while mid-ranking women managers in TV media are slowly increasing, a glass ceiling is very much there. Quratul-Ain-Tahmina, the lead researcher of the study, concluded that the media landscape of Bangladesh is still quite male-dominated.

So is our society. Then why should the media be anything different? Because journalism at its core is dedicated to public interest. When more than half of the population is women, one cannot do quality journalism by ignoring their interests. And the media also has their stake in this. By reaching out to women, it can expand their audience at a time when news outlets are struggling to keep them. Media houses need to represent the society better in order to be more relevant.

At present, we see pages dedicated to women in newspapers or TV programmes which feature lifestyle stories such as cooking, fashion, relationship or entertainment. It is not fair to think that half of our population is only interested in these topics.

guess from the lists provided by some Dhaka-based journalist associations such as Dhaka Union of Journalists (DUJ) and Dhaka Reporters Unity (DRU). According to DUJ, nine percent of enlisted journalists could be women, judging by their names. DRU said of their total members, seven percent were women.

More than 500 newspapers are published from Dhaka, but only two of them have female editors. Most of the newsrooms have very few women in decision-making levels. In interviews and group discussions conducted under the study, women journalists

To reach out to a women audience will require audience research. At present, we see pages dedicated to women in newspapers or TV programmes which feature lifestyle stories such as cooking, fashion, relationship or entertainment. It is not fair to think that half of our population is only interested in these topics. For rural women, the media seems to allocate even less space. They are generally the least engaged news users. And they don't see themselves represented anywhere in the news except probably as the victims of murder, rape, harassment or some

environmental disaster.

The portrayal of women in the media in general is also unacceptable. It seems society is changing more quickly than the media. We still like to see women only as victims. Whenever there is an accident, we see women crying in the news. Whenever we see reports on gas or water crises, it seems only the women are suffering. And, while working women can be found in every sector in our country, we still don't see them much in the news. The monitoring exercise also found that only 3.5 percent women as experts were quoted in news stories.

We need a long-term strategy and advocacy to change the mindset of the newsroom and the owners first. Only then the media can contribute to changing the mindset of society, by breaking stereotypes and promoting gender equality.

And the media is not the only stakeholder here. The Ministry of Information, Press Institute, Press Council, Universities Grants Commission (UGC) and relevant institutions need to have a common road map to achieve the goal. Media laws and regulations in Bangladesh lack a requirement for equal coverage of women or other gender minorities in media content. Sector-wide self-regulatory frameworks are also very rare. More stress on having policies, especially within media organisations, is needed. This includes self-regulation in the digital platforms as well.

Journalism schools can also contribute a lot in this aspect. They can consider if the classroom is accommodating the demands of the newsroom, to review the curriculum to see if there is anything we can add to enable the journalism students to be more gender-sensitive.

And above all, we all need to be on the same page, aspiring towards the fullest extent of freedom of expression, so that women or other vulnerable genders can also enjoy equal rights.