

Bangladesh's persistent child abuse woes



A CLOSER LOOK
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In the first three months of 2023, 128 children were killed across Bangladesh, according to data published by legal aid group Ain o Salish Kendra (ASK). During the same period, 225 more children were subjected to various forms of abuse and repression. Among the repressed children, at least 75 were victims of rape, including boys. These deaths and repression have been attributed to a plethora of reasons, ranging from killing after rape, killing after abduction, and killing after torture (in domestic sphere), to torture of underaged domestic workers, torture by law enforcement members, and torture by teachers.

Unfortunately, for our country, this is not a new revelation. ASK, along with other human rights organisations, publish such reports every year, with news outlets reporting the bloody and harrowing details of the crimes against children. Not every incident comes to light, however. Often, families of the victims choose to suppress these incidents, especially where physical abuse and torture is meted out by family members, extended family members and/or friends and neighbours, fearing social stigma and at times under family pressure. Often,

the victimised children refrain from sharing their experiences with even their immediate family members - including parents - fearing castigation and punishment. As a result, these incidents go unrecorded and unpunished, with the child victims living with the nightmare of these experiences for the rest of their lives. Often, these children grow up with emotional and psychological complications, including self-blaming, self-hatred, self-doubt, depression, anxiety, and a constant fear of people.

A 2019 study titled "The Devastating Clinical Consequences of Child Abuse and Neglect: Increased Disease Vulnerability and Poor Treatment Response in Mood Disorders," published in the American Journal of Psychiatry, revealed that 46 percent of people with depression and 57 percent of people with bipolar disorder reported being abused as children. The study found that childhood maltreatment "is also associated with a more pernicious disease course, including a greater number of lifetime depressive episodes and greater depression severity, with the majority of studies showing more recurrence and greater persistence of depressive episodes."

While the point that child abuse leaves a lasting impact on the victims is obvious to most, in many social clusters - especially the fringes - children are continuously subjected to various forms of abuse and maltreatment, with no measure in place to protect them. Taking a closer look at ASK data

128 in 2023 (January-March). While these statistics are concerning, what is even more alarming is the number of cases that are filed each year. Analysing the ASK data, one can see that while cases were filed for 57 percent of incidents in 2020, it came down to 52 percent in 2022 and 41 percent

pursuing justice, but also the pitfalls in the law enforcement and justice systems that prevent families from seeking help.

According to a report published in the Financial Express in October 2022, titled "Upswing in women's repression as cases pile up," there were 43,114 cases related to women's repression pending for over five years in 99 women and children repression prevention courts across Bangladesh as of June 30, 2022, and the total number of under-trial cases in these courts was 178,231. This means that more than 24 percent of these cases have been running for more than five years. This data needs to be interpreted in light of the fact that under the provisions of the Women and Children Repression Prevention Act, trials of cases should be completed within 180 days.

Unfortunately, in such cases, every layer of action towards justice is riddled with delays and red tape - from investigation to framing of charges to scheduling of hearings at courts. And the delays get more frustrating in case of rape cases due to the apparently complex process of obtaining medical certificates and DNA reports, since there is no stipulated time frame for obtaining DNA reports per the law.

On top of all this, there is another, more sinister reason why families shy away from filing cases: fear of reprisal from the criminals. Reports of victims and their families being suppressed by the criminals, at times in collusion with dishonest law enforcers, abound in different media, resulting in silence and social injustice. Victims are also not always aware

of the support systems available for them. Case in point: there are nine projects by the women and children affairs ministry to ensure immediate action in cases of torture of women and children. But how many of these projects do we know of? One project that could be a useful tool to provide tangible support to victims is the National Helpline 109. Unfortunately, although the helpline is supposed to provide counselling and services to the victims, they are mostly only capable of providing information, due to a shortage of resources.

It is these limitations - man-made and avoidable - that hinder our ability to protect our children, that hold us back from seeking legal recourse. Also, our own inhibitions in discussing the reality of child abuse with our children leaves them unprepared to handle such a situation, make informed decisions, and speak up if/when they are victimised.

It is up to us as adults to talk to our children and empower them with knowledge and know-how on how best to avoid being in such situations, and what to do in case they are victimised. It is up to the parents and guardians to provide safe space so children can share their deepest and darkest thoughts, their fears and nightmares, so that the adults can help them heal. It is also up to the adults to stand up for the children to ensure that they get justice, despite the pressure and coercion.

And it is up to us as a nation to ensure that our children grow up empowered, healthy - physically, emotionally and mentally - and confident to realise their full potential.



It is up to the adults to stand up for the children and ensure safe space for them. PHOTO: FARIDA ALAM

since 2020, one would notice that while cases of child abuse has come down year-on-year from 1,718 in 2020, 1,426 in 2021, 1,088 in 2022, to 225 in 2023 (January-March), child killing has hovered above the 500 range, with 589 killings reported in 2020, 596 in 2021, 516 in 2022, and

in 2023 (January-March), with the exception in 2021, when it went up to 59 percent. Cases filed for child killing have fluctuated from 44 percent in 2020, 39 percent in 2021, 42 percent in 2022 to 44 percent in 2023 (January-March). These data sets reveal not just our inhibitions in

Four ways to boost clean energy in Bangladesh



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As the finance minister of Bangladesh prepares the national budget for FY2023-24, to be proposed in June, the energy and power sectors should get some attention. Despite the success of the incumbent government over the last decade in accelerating the country's power generation capacity, a reliance on imported fossil fuels has exposed its vulnerability to external energy price shocks. The Bangladesh Power Development Board (BPDB) is also experiencing the uphill task of managing the burgeoning subsidy burden.

Against this backdrop, the upcoming budget could guide the vulnerable power and energy sectors towards economic sustainability and energy security. The national budget should aim to spur renewable energy expansion, particularly solar. Budgetary support for clean energy initiatives and directives to utilise expensive fossil-fuel-based power plants less could boost clean energy in the country.

Upscaling solar irrigation

Under the draft Integrated Energy and Power Master Plan (IEPMP), expected to be released this year, Bangladesh has set a clean energy target of 40 percent by 2041. To attain this goal, the country should replace diesel-run irrigation systems with solar power.

While the Infrastructure Development Company Ltd (IDCOL) has been supporting this initiative with funding from donor agencies, spearheading transformation in a sector comprising some 1.07 million irrigation systems would require additional support.

IDCOL's financing model includes a grant component with debt and equity for solar pumps. Following this tested model, the government could allocate grant funds, distributed over several years, towards solar irrigation for a more rapid sectoral transformation. An assessment of the full funding needed and the donor agencies' contribution level would help the government determine the necessary budget allocation for the sector.

Notably, replacing diesel-fired irrigation pumps with solar-driven systems could help Bangladesh install 4,000MW of solar capacity and reduce annual fuel import bills worth \$917 million by avoiding diesel consumption and supplying additional electricity to the grid. It would also help avoid 3.7 million tonnes of CO2 emissions annually, and contribute considerably to

achieving Bangladesh's climate goals. Additionally, large-scale implementation of solar irrigation systems would create job opportunities.

Battery storage for flexible generation

With the growing share of renewable energy in its power mix, Bangladesh could enhance flexibility in the power system. Incorporating battery storage systems with the new grid-scale solar projects would provide flexibility and help reduce oil-based power generation when the sun is not shining. This could also reduce gas-based peaking power plant operations.

Although energy storage is expensive, it is getting cheaper and will likely be a more viable option in the future. Bangladesh could therefore start piloting new grid-scale solar projects backed by battery storage systems. The government

1,000MW of rooftop solar systems might cost Tk 7,000 crore (\$0.66 billion), of which the four accessories above would account for 25-30 percent (Tk 1,750-2,100 crore) of the total cost. Assuming the average burden of duties is 30 percent of the total cost of accessories, the one-off import duties would be less than Tk 650 crore (\$61 million). At the same time, 1,000MW of rooftop solar systems could generate 1,400 million kWh of electricity, assuming four hours of operation a day for 350 days a year.

Given that the BPDB purchased electricity at more than Tk 15/kWh (\$0.14) from a good number of power plants in FY2021-22, and large industries currently pay around Tk 9.78/kWh (\$0.092/kWh) for grid electricity after three rounds of price hikes, rooftop solar systems would reduce costs by Tk 5.25/kWh (\$0.05). Considering this per unit savings, the BPDB could save Tk 735 crore (\$69 million) per annum from the potential 1,400 million kWh of electricity generated from rooftop systems. Over a span of 25 years, the combined financial gain from 1,000MW of rooftop solar power would be Tk 18,375 crore (\$1.73 billion), which is around 30 times more than the one-off duties the government would collect over the

recommend that the Power Division design a pathway to reduce reliance on expensive oil-based electricity and increase the use of clean energy.

Over the last decade, Bangladesh has made significant efforts towards renewable energy development,

albeit with limited progress. However, interest in renewables is growing among private and public sector agencies amid rising power generation costs and subsidy burden. Utility-scale projects are coming online too. Building on

this momentum, the four points proposed here could be incorporated in the budget and would help Bangladesh transition more quickly to a clean and cheaper power generation system with enhanced energy security.

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could keep this piloting provision under the energy and power sectors' budgetary allocation to create an ecosystem for swift implementation of storage facilities at scale once they become financially viable.

The government could also earmark budget funds to identify suitable land for grid-scale solar projects, and assess both offshore and onshore wind potential.

Waiver or reimbursement of duties on rooftop solar accessories

Studies have shown that industrial rooftops in Bangladesh could accommodate some 5,000MW of solar energy. However, four accessories - namely fibre-reinforced polymer walkways, imported inverters, mounting structures, and direct current cable - are subject to import duties, ranging from 15.25 percent to 58.6percent, raising project costs.

A ballpark analysis reveals that Bangladesh would be better off removing the duties than realising one-off import revenue. For instance, installing a combined capacity of

same period.

While Bangladesh's low tax-GDP ratio is one reason for collecting these duties, the one-off revenue from import duties is meagre compared to the total revenue of Tk 332,473.4 crore (\$31.28 billion) collected in FY2021-22. In the upcoming budget, the government should consider including a directive to waive the existing duties on rooftop solar accessories or reimburse the amount later.

Reducing dependence on oil-based power generation

Energy curves analysis shows that Bangladesh uses expensive oil-based electricity generation throughout the year. A good number of oil-fired units cost the BPDB Tk 15-20/kWh (\$0.14-0.19/kWh) in FY2021-22, although in one case the cost was as high as Tk 30/kWh (\$0.28/kWh). However, rooftop and utility-scale solar can generate electricity at Tk 5.25/kWh and Tk 7.6/kWh, respectively. In light of the need for transitioning to a clean and cost-effective electricity system, the finance minister could

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