

Plastic garbage is choking us to death!

Planned waste disposal and recycling must be implemented urgently

The choking of most drains in Khulna city due to indiscriminate dumping of garbage, as reported by this newspaper on Saturday, paints a picture of unplanned waste disposal that, unfortunately, plagues the entire country. The most frightening aspect of this garbage fiasco is that it contains thousands of tons of plastic waste which is not biodegradable and wreaks havoc on the environment as well as people's health.

In Khulna, there is a huge dearth of bins leading to residents dumping trash into open drains and even roadside spaces, and it is happening under the nose of the local administration. Efforts to clean the drains have been apparently slowed due to "manpower shortage". The narrative remains the same in many other cities and towns as well, with little progress being achieved in terms of solving our garbage problem. Equally distressing is the accumulation of plastics as a result of this problem. Plastics and polythene not only clog the drains and water bodies, causing waterlogging; they also enter the soil ruining its fertility by killing larvae, earthworms and microbes. The toxic chemicals of micro-plastics also enter the food chain harming the health of humans and animals – another devastating result of this monstrous pile-up of plastics.

Last month, the prime minister warned about the plastic pollution. She said that her government had taken multifaceted initiatives to reduce plastic production and ensure proper waste management. We earnestly urge the government to speed up these initiatives and implement them at the ground level. This should include a multi-ministerial body that will monitor these efforts and rigorously ensure that dumping of plastics into water bodies, including drains, is prevented. The government must vigorously enforce the recycling of plastics. The various environment-related acts adopted by the government have to be enforced. This includes the Mandatory Jute Packaging Act 2013 which aims to replace plastic packaging with jute packaging. In fact, we must revive our original initiatives to completely ban polythene and replace them with biodegradable jute bags.

The state of drains and unregulated dumping of garbage across the cities in Bangladesh are a wake-up call about the urgency of addressing the plastic menace. Proper waste management with the help of adequate manpower, removal of plastics from the environment and effective recycling efforts have to be part of our development agenda going forward.

Take measures to combat river erosion

Govt must help local communities become more resilient to such calamities

It is alarming to know that river erosion has reached alarming levels in about eight districts including Kurigram and Lalmonirhat, damaging homes, farmlands and educational institutions. According to a report, multiple rivers, including the Brahmaputra, Teesta, Dharla, Dudhkumar, and Gangadhar, are eroding the banks in at least 60 locations. In Kurigram, about 280 homes, three schools, and a college have been washed away, while in Lalmonirhat, about 20 homesteads have disappeared. Many farmlands and over 500 homesteads are also reported to be under threat.

The figures provided by the Bangladesh Water Development Board (BWDB) paint a gloomy picture of devastation being caused by river erosion. It shows how a predictable seasonal menace has been allowed to wreak havoc thanks to a lack of timely action by those in charge. Elderly individuals like Hajera Bewa, who lost her house and arable land, now find themselves destitute and compelled to start anew. There has been even an instance of an entire village being swallowed by the Dharla river, as per the account of 40-year-old Shukcharan Barman in Lalmonirhat. Their pleas for help and lasting solutions resonate with the anguish of the affected and at-risk communities.

In Tangail, where the Jamuna reportedly washed away over 100 houses, villagers even demonstrated by blocking roads. While administrative efforts to combat river erosion through the placement of sandbags and concrete blocks are commendable, it is clear that these measures are insufficient to address the magnitude of the problem. The need for long-term solutions, including the construction of embankments and permanent dams, cannot be overstated. It is also vitally important – as monsoon continues to bring more rain, not just in these districts but also many other parts of the country – that the government allocates sufficient resources to relief and rehabilitation efforts. It is crucial that these efforts focus not only on short-term aid but also on sustainable solutions enabling local communities to become more resilient to future disasters.

We must prioritise the development of robust infrastructure that can withstand the erosive power of our rivers during monsoon.

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

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Inability to issue birth certificate

We usually submit applications for birth certificates and necessary documents to the respective city corporation. Afterwards, they issue the certificate. But for the last month, the Dhaka South City Corporation has not been able to issue certificates because their server is down. So how long will it take to repair the server? The DSCC has not given us a proper answer. We urge authorities to resolve this issue immediately.

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ESSENTIAL SERVICES BILL 2023

A step back for labour rights



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The Essential Services Bill 2023, which is an update to the original Essential Services (Maintenance) Act 1952, is currently awaiting presidential approval. As of April 2023, the bill was tabled for discussion in Parliament, and the standing committee was allowed 30 days to produce a report on it. This law, if passed, will allow the government to declare certain services to be deemed "essential" in public interest. For now, a long list of services (including the passenger or goods transport services by land, rail, water or air; hospitals, clinics, health centres; any services relating to establishments or organisations engaged in the production, transportation, supply or distribution of coal, gas, electricity, steel, and fertilisers) have already been described as "essential services" in the bill.

Once the revised Essential Services (Maintenance) Act (ESMA) is enforced, the rights of anyone who is considered a worker under the law can be affected, because this will give the government the extraordinary political power to declare any service as "essential" in the name of public interest. "Public interest" is an umbrella term that legislatures like to use to circumvent the general process for the welfare of the public, but the inherent ambiguity and expansiveness of this phrase can also be weaponised to justify a political agenda. Without a concrete definition of the circumstances under which the government can declare a service as essential, ESMA can be misused incredibly easily. The Bangladesh government's affinity towards businesses and its hostility towards any form of protests (including workers' legitimate strikes) paint a bleak picture as to how the new law might be used.

When do workers really protest or go on strike? To answer that, I would first describe exactly who a "worker" is under the labour laws of Bangladesh. As per Section 2 of the Labour Act 2006, people who work at industries or establishments to perform skilled, unskilled, manual, technical, clerical work but generally do not have administrative, supervisory, or decision-making power are considered to be workers in Bangladesh. Hence, any employee in a managerial or supervisory position is a non-worker. That is, their rights are dictated by their employment contracts, while employees at the most baseline tier (such as garment workers) are at the behest of government-made labour laws. Labour Act 2006 and Labour Rules 2015 only lay down the minimum rights of workers. Since cheap labour brings more profits, business owners usually do not spend a penny more towards workers' wages or safety

than what they are legally required to spend. So, while you and I may be able to go to our bosses to negotiate a better salary, the workers must go to the government with their claims – which generally takes the form of a protest or strike, because unless the wheel of development stops turning, the state does not pay attention to the workers' needs.

In Bangladesh, the current labour laws already make it difficult for workers to unionise. For instance, as per section 179(2) of the Labour Act 2006, a trade union of workers is not entitled to be registered unless it has a minimum membership of 20 percent of the total number of employed workers in that establishment. The right to strike is



In effect, ESMA seems to be nothing short of a joint exploitation tactic by the government and businesses to further oppress workers.

VISUAL: REHNUMA PROSHOON

further encumbered by the requirement of 51 percent union members voting in favour of the strike. By virtue of the Labour Act 2006, the government also retains the right to stop a strike if it is satisfied that the strike may cause "serious hardship to the community" or is "prejudicial to national interest." True to the pattern of creating worker-adverse laws, these terms have not been defined in the Labour Act 2006, either.

A vast majority of the labour force in Bangladesh consists of workers whose minimum employment rights are decided by labour laws. ESMA will very discreetly overpower every worker's critical right to strike, under the thinly veiled perception of "public interest." Considering that ESMA will prevail over the Labour Act 2006 and the Labour Rules 2015, workers' right to strike in Bangladesh may cease to exist.

6 to 12 months. Upon this declaration, the workers will be prevented from legally going on strike even if they have a grievance. The minimum wage in the RMG industry was last reviewed in 2018, with Tk 8,000 being set for an entry-level factory worker. In comparison, RMG exports from the country have increased by 14.31 percent to \$27.418 billion during the period of July 2022 to January 2023.

While the economy is plagued by alarming inflation, only the desperation of unaffordability and poverty would compel RMG workers to come down with a strike against the current wage structure. But a discreetly notorious law like ESMA will then allow the government to criminalise such a crucial labour strike.

The original ESMA 1952, enacted in the then India, is still being used

enhancing roles of labour unions, etc – if the government had the political will to prioritise workers over businesses.

In effect, ESMA seems to be nothing short of a joint exploitation tactic by the government and businesses to further oppress workers. If a worker's right to strike is not absolute, then at least it has to be negotiable with the authorities. If the intention genuinely is to continue essential services, the state must demonstrate this by setting a reasonable benchmark of fairness for the workers, rather than covertly oppressive laws. Workers would not wish to occupy the streets if their needs were being met, and it's impossible to have their needs met when, during the extreme inflation of 2023, a worker's minimum wage is still set at the infinitesimal rate of Tk 8,000.

PROJECT ■ SYNDICATE

Winning the fight for women's land rights

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TARJA HALONEN and HINDOU OUMAROU IBRAHIM

Women have cultivated and nurtured life on our planet for centuries. Yet while the world enjoys the fruits of their labour, they often have no say or control over the land they work.

To add insult to injury, the twin threats of drought and desertification – intensified by climate change – have reduced the amount of usable land, jeopardising livelihoods as well as food production. Moreover, unsustainable farming is eroding soil 100 times faster than natural processes can restore it. The UN has classified up to 40 percent of the world's land as degraded.

Land degradation is a huge challenge, but the solution lies in the people most concerned about protecting this valuable resource: women. When given the chance, women are responsible stewards who use their extensive knowledge and skills to protect and restore the land in their possession. They have also proven capable of building resilience to droughts, which are becoming more severe and more common as temperatures rise.

As matters stand, women are

rarely offered such opportunities. Discriminatory practices such as inadequate land-tenure systems, limited access to credit, unequal pay, low levels of decision-making autonomy, and sexual- and gender-based violence prevent their active participation in land management.

In Chad, the government excludes many women and girls from land allocations, leaving them with insecure tenure. Gender norms that devalue the contributions of women further reinforce their precarious position. The common expression "Mara saki" (meaning "She's just a woman") exemplifies this sexist dynamic.

The problem extends far beyond one country. Despite comprising nearly half of the world's agricultural workforce and producing up to 80 percent of food in developing economies, women own less than one-fifth of land worldwide. More than 100 governments continue to deny women the right to inherit their husband's property.

This imbalance, coupled with the worsening climate crisis, leads to

female agricultural workers bearing the brunt of land degradation. They suffer from food and water scarcity and are often forced to migrate, which is a contributing factor to gender inequality and its expression through violence and discrimination against women and girls. Indigenous women and girls, people with disabilities, and female human-rights defenders are particularly vulnerable in such conditions.

Frustrated by their lack of agency in decision-making, women in some countries have started to fight for their land rights. Sierra Leone, for example, recently passed a new law that grants women the right to own, lease, or buy land in the country.

In Tanzania, women who have been given stronger land rights are earning up to 3.8 times more income and are also more likely to have individual savings. This highlights an important by-product of equal land rights: economic security for women and girls. Giving women a greater say in land management can have cascading knock-on effects on household income, food security, and investment in children's education and health.

Equal land rights could also boost food security, as women invest more in agricultural technology, and use indigenous traditional knowledge that results in higher yields. In fact, if

women farmers had access to the same level of resources as men, the number of undernourished people in the world could be reduced by as much as 100-150 million people.

To make this a reality, governments must remove the barriers that prevent women and girls from owning and inheriting land. More broadly, policymakers should involve women in decisions about land management, conservation, and restoration. And, by expanding access to credit, for example, financial institutions can make it easier for female agricultural workers to purchase the technology and inputs required to improve yields, protect soils, and guard against land degradation. Yet the most important work, including raising awareness and campaigning for change, falls to local communities.

The UN Convention to Combat Desertification has placed gender equality at the core of its mandate – and for good reason. As the convention acknowledges in its Gender Action Plan, women play a crucial role in sustainable land management. Consequently, securing women's land rights is not only the right thing to do; it will boost land-restoration efforts, develop long-term resilience to droughts, and create more equitable economies.