

Investigate sexual violence against RMG workers

Reports of GBV, harassment in factories can no longer be ignored

In any conversation on Bangladesh's development journey, it is a given that the RMG sector will feature heavily. The empowerment of RMG workers, a majority of whom are women, is routinely cited as an economic success story. However, what is often overlooked are the vulnerable and precarious conditions in which they continue to work to this day.

A recent survey on gender-based violence (GBV) in RMG factories, conducted by nine RMG workers' organisations with support from Solidarity Center, only confirms this. Of the 140 workers who participated, 45 percent had experienced sexual violence and harassment. A proportion of the workers were also subjected to psychological harassment (22 percent), verbal abuse (17 percent), economic exploitation (nine percent), and physical violence (seven percent). The majority of these incidents occurred within factories and were perpetrated by co-workers and supervisors, followed by line chiefs and mid-to-senior-level management officials.

The GBV faced by workers is completely unacceptable and in violation of their rights, but what is equally worrying is the implication that the factory management is complicit in either perpetrating the abuse, or allowing it to continue. A shocking 91 percent of respondents shared that the perpetrators held power over them due to their connections to mid-to-senior-level management, or to local influentials and their associates. Half of the workers surveyed said they faced wage deductions or were made to work extra hours without overtime pay by their supervisors or factory management if they did not agree to their sexual advances. Another 48 percent reported a change in their production targets if they filed complaints with the authorities.

This cannot be called anything but exploitation, and needs to be treated as such. In the study, a number of recommendations were provided for the government, employers, trade unions and federations to fight GBV. However, recommendations cannot be put into place if even the authorities refuse to accept it as a serious issue. In 2019, ActionAid Bangladesh published a similar report, where they surveyed 200 RMG workers and found that 80 percent of them had experienced or witnessed abuse at work. At the time, the BGMEA's only response was to reject the report, terming it to be harmful to the global image of the industry.

We would argue that such statements, and the callous disregard of such serious allegations, harm the image of the industry more than the reports themselves. We can no longer continue to dismiss these allegations and brush them under the carpet. The authorities must investigate these allegations and ensure that the rights of women and of workers are no longer violated.

Why do we only pretend to care about rivers?

Save the Kharia River from government apathy and inaction

We are extremely disturbed that yet another river is on the verge of dying because of pure negligence and inaction from all authorities concerned. The Kharia, once a primary support for agriculture, fisheries and transportation in Phulpur upazila, Mymensingh, has now become a seasonal narrow stream, marred with heaps of toxic waste and encroached lands. Despite continuous appeals from journalists, experts and environmental organisations, and numerous directives from the High Court and the government, no effective steps have been taken to save the river, just like many other rivers in this riverine country.

We want to know why, during its 23 years of existence, the Phulpur municipality has failed to develop a proper garbage management system to stop people from dumping waste in the river, or to clear up the waste accumulated for years, and even the garbage that the municipality itself used to dump beside the river. While the locals have been repeatedly accusing powerful and influential individuals of encroaching considerable parts of the 25-km river, the UNO, who is also the authorised local personnel of the National River Conservation Commission (NRCC), says they are still working on the list of encroachments. Here, too, there is little indication of implementing the 17 directives to save rivers, ruled by the High Court back in 2019.

While the government has been expressing satisfaction with their drives to save rivers – for instance, in September 2022, State Minister for Shipping Khalid Mahmud Chowdhury falsely claimed that the BIWTA had cleared 90 percent of the river areas grabbed illegally – cases like the Kharia expose that the dire condition is not only limited to big rivers beside large cities and industrial areas. Besides the Kharia, many rivers in Mymensingh including the Brahmaputra, Khiru, Sutia, and Norosunda are in dreadful conditions because of similar reasons. Ruling party lawmaker and former food minister Kamrul Islam stated last year that the river grabbers and the public representatives who assist them extort benefits from the ruling party. We have also seen instances where river grabbers marked by the NRCC continued to work with Bangladesh Inland Water Transport Authority (BIWTA) and Bangladesh Inland Water Transport Corporation (BIWTC), both of which are under the shipping ministry. We fear that this culture of inaction, negligence, and allowing influential individuals and companies to keep encroaching on major rivers encourages the local authorities to overlook the bare minimum to save relatively smaller rivers like the Kharia.

Although it seems like a lost battle at this point, we urge the authorities to finally internalise the unparalleled importance of rivers for our country, people, and the environment, and take action accordingly.

The allure of studying abroad



BLOWIN' IN THE WIND

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A recent report published in this paper pointed out how the number of Bangladeshi students going abroad has trebled over the last 15 years despite the rise in the number of homegrown universities. The key argument focuses on the lack of quality education at home, prompting those who could afford or find external funding to pursue higher education abroad. The report identifies some push factors, but denies some pull factors behind such mobility.

Destination nations are strategically targeting countries like Bangladesh, which has shown significant economic growth in the last two decades. There is a growing middle class in this eighth-most populous country in the world, where 18.56 percent of the people are in the 15-24 age group. International recruiters have not failed to notice the market determined by demand for education and global career aspirations. As the World Bank points out, "the overall quality of the country's human capital is low," and only four percent of workers have studied beyond their secondary schools, meaning "Bangladesh's workforce of 87 million is largely undereducated."

Shouldn't we then be happy that our students are taking the opportunity to benefit from the education systems abroad? At least such movement among our students promises better opportunities, higher salaries, improved working conditions, or access to advanced research and technology. Students, upon completion of their degrees overseas, can bring back knowledge, skills and networks that benefit their home countries to counterbalance the fear of brain drain. But that is all in theory. The reality is that "student migration is increasingly being taken as a route for long-term emigration, sometimes resulting in irregular migration," according to an official of the International Organization for Migration (IOM). Some of the other factors beyond individual decisions to use the education route involve political instability, lack of job opportunities, inadequate infrastructure, and unfavourable economic conditions in



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the home countries.

The push factors are well-understood. But why is the pull from foreign countries so strong? The simple answer is revenue. In 2020-21, international students pumped 42 billion pounds into the UK economy. Without international students, most UK universities will run on a deficit budget. "International students pay between £10,000 and £38,000 a year – the highest fees in the world – and are in effect super-taxing their own, often poor, countries to cross-subsidize UK students" (*The Guardian*). Against each local student, there are five foreign students in the UK. After Brexit, the flow of European students has plummeted, and there are new initiatives to bring in students from South Asia and Africa, among other places.

On the other side of the pond, nearly one million international students who attended US institutions contributed \$33.8 billion to the country's economy and created more than 335,000 jobs in 2020-21. The same year, international students contributed over 22.3 billion dollars to the Canadian economy

because the return on investment is higher. A typical MBA degree in Canada will cost you 95,000 Canadian dollars, leading to a salary of 100,000 dollars per year. It is an investment for your future as it enhances career opportunities and has the potential for higher earnings. The success of diaspora communities will further influence the decision to study abroad. This feeling is rampant among the elite class, most of whom have studied in English medium schools and feel left out by the mainstream system.

The rosy picture hides the fact that many of these international students are exploited as cheap labour. Not all students going abroad have the means to sustain full fees and living expenses. These students are hired with a minimum or below-par wage. Students often get stuck in a cycle of low-paid work and find it difficult to transition into more stable and better-paying career paths after completing their education. This perpetuates social and economic inequities, as students from disadvantaged backgrounds might be disproportionately affected,

the vicinity of 50,000. The sad reality is that our local institutions are failing to retain some of our better students who are good enough to be enrolled in world-class universities. Apart from a few public and private universities, the quality of higher education is nothing to write home about. So how do we deal with this growing trend where not only our young ones, but also our hard-earned money are going abroad?

There has to be a national strategy. Identify the areas in which we want our human capital to be trained abroad. Introduce a national policy scheme to send our talented individuals to institutions that have gone through a rigorous credential check. We need to protect the outbound students from various predators and visa colleges that exploit them. We need to negotiate with foreign missions to increase scholarships and funding opportunities based on merit. If our counterparts can set their nationalist agenda first, we need to do the same! And, above all, we need to improve the quality of our educational institutions at all levels.

What does the new Covid spike mean for Bangladesh?



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A report published by the World Health Organization (WHO) on August 10 showed that Covid-19 cases had increased by 80 percent over 28 days, from July 10 to August 6, compared to the previous 28 days. The same analysis found that South Korea reported 1.2 million new infections during the same period. In fact, the country's surge of the subvariant of Omicron – EG.5 – alone has driven up the global infection rate. The US Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) has also reported a 14 percent increase in Covid-19 hospitalisations in the first week of August. However, the actual global infection rate is much higher, as infections are no longer continuously tracked and testing has sharply declined universally. Indeed, this spike bodes for a worldwide surge of Covid-related illnesses in autumn.

But what does this new spike in Covid infections mean for Bangladesh?

As of now, the country has lost 29,476 lives to the pandemic, and experienced more than two million infections. Of course, after the highest number of deaths in June and August of 2021, daily deaths and infections have steadily declined. Despite that, there have been reports of deaths due to Covid throughout 2022 and 2023. On June 28 this year, five died from the virus, and in the current month of August, four deaths have so far been recorded.

Experts contend that Covid has

effectively become a seasonal flu and is not strong enough to create a wave anywhere in the world as of now. They have, in fact, lowered the threat of the virus globally, as they anticipate it to be more of a public health challenge, not a crisis. In the US, the Joe Biden administration has even eliminated the position of the top Covid-19 White House official along with its formal ending of the Covid public health emergency in May this year. The administration does not expect the virus to become a major development in any way that can disrupt public life.

However, of particular note is the view of the Association of Public Health Laboratories CEO Scott Becker, "We never expected variants to just disappear. So, the virus is doing what viruses do. We're watching all of this in order to better be prepared for any fall surge in respiratory diseases."

What is our part that we must do?

The first approach is to maintain and observe best practices to not get the virus in the first place: for example, wearing a mask, maintaining social distance practices, and of course, getting the recommended vaccines and boosters to avoid hospitalisation. Most healthy adults develop some degree of immunity from vaccination, prior to Covid infections, and the overall availability of treatment plans. However, they can well spread the virus to their loved ones and even end up in emergency departments if they are not

vaccinated and boosted.

A new study published by Yale University researchers found a preliminary connection between practising the recommended Covid guidelines and Covid-related deaths. The researchers studied 538,159 registered Democrats and Republicans in Florida and Ohio who died between January 1, 2018 and December 31, 2021. They marked May 1, 2021, one month

Alongside adhering to established Covid practices, we must also replenish our stockpiles of vaccines. We must coordinate with vaccine manufacturers, foreign governments and international agencies to ensure enough availability of shots, as they have proven to be the most effective in fighting the disease, per the Yale study.

after Covid vaccines were available to all US adults, as a major milestone. The study aimed to scientifically analyse data to discover if the apathy to observe Covid guidelines has a bearing on the deaths. It found that 43 percent more Republican voters died from Covid than their Democrat counterparts.

Republicans are overwhelmingly conservative and have expressly objected to most Covid regulations, and even vaccine mandates, deeming them to be an obstacle to their freedom of choice and civil liberty. So, from the party leadership, including

former President Donald Trump, to the common supporters, there was strong opposition to most restrictions. By contrast, Democrats overall strongly adhered to the guidelines. Once in the White House, Biden also placed strong Covid measures to curb the pandemic.

In Bangladesh as well as globally, many evoke God's will to skirt recommended practices around health issues. The study above should be a wake-up call to those who readily bank on unproven and unscientific approaches to their health.

Alongside adhering to established Covid practices, we must also replenish our stockpiles of vaccines. We must coordinate with vaccine manufacturers, foreign governments and international agencies to ensure enough availability of shots, as they have proven to be the most effective in fighting the disease, per the Yale study. We must prioritise two high-risk groups in vaccination programmes: the elderly and those with low income. The hospitalisation rate for seniors is significantly higher than that for other age groups. We must ensure that all at-risk populations have their testing and vaccine needs met immediately and adequately.

The new Covid spike should be taken as a clarion call to prepare as we head into the autumn when the cases are expected to surge. Bangladesh may experience a localised spike or a small wave at worst. Even though the virus will pose considerably less danger to public health than it did during the height of the pandemic, it will continue to remain a challenge and claim lives while driving up hospitalisation and even potentially straining our healthcare system. Early preparedness and prevention programmes can make all the difference when the virus will trend up in the winter. It is the time to act now.