

Why this apathy to maternal health?

Health authorities must raise awareness, strengthen public healthcare programmes

The indifference and lack of support still experienced by expectant and new mothers in Bangladesh, especially those from low-income backgrounds, is quite shocking, to say the least. Many pregnant women still do not go to healthcare centres for the necessary prenatal checkups, and when it comes to postnatal care (PNC), the situation is equally worrying. According to a recent *Prothom Alo* story, many rural women are not even aware of this essential service which they can easily get from local healthcare facilities of the government. The result is, they suffer from a variety of serious postpartum health complications, which can lead to deaths.

According to data from the Bangladesh Sample Vital Statistics 2022, 156 mothers die due to childbirth-related complications per 100,000 live births in the country. And according to the Bangladesh Demographic and Health Survey (BDHS), 20 newborns (from birth to 28 days) die per 1,000 live births. The numbers are quite worrying, more so because they demonstrate that we haven't been able to reduce maternal and child mortality at the expected rate. At a time when the government claims that it has improved healthcare services for expectant and new mothers, such a high number of deaths is unacceptable. This calls for urgent interventions from the relevant authorities.

New mothers are generally suggested to take postnatal services from trained healthcare providers at least four times after childbirth – the first within 24 hours; the second on the second or third day; the third on the fourth/fifth/sixth day; and the last on the 42nd day. But many seldom take these services. This is hard to accept given the fact that hospital deliveries have reportedly increased to 65 percent now from 53 percent in 2017-18. If only new mothers took these four PNC sessions, many life-threatening conditions they generally face could have been avoided.

It is, therefore, vital that the authorities take steps to change this situation. What they must first do is raise awareness among the families in low-income groups, especially in the rural areas, about the importance of both prenatal and postnatal healthcare. Local healthcare providers must encourage all expectant and new mothers to take services from nearby healthcare facilities. They should be especially encouraged to take postnatal care which can detect malnutrition, anaemia, high blood pressure, fistula and other complications on time, and lead to proper treatment.

Equally importantly, child marriage must be stopped at all costs. Doing so can significantly decrease maternal mortality caused by childbirth. Experts have also suggested that the PNC services should be linked with the government's existing immunisation programmes in order to encourage women to take these services. With proper approaches and effective interventions, the current situation can indeed be reversed.

Unfinished bridges, unmet promises

A wake-up call for Bangladesh's development planners

The Daily Star's front-page picture of a bridge long in the making in Narail's Kalia upazila, as published on September 20, serves as a poignant reminder of the challenges that often plague infrastructure development in Bangladesh. This bridge, its unfinished pillars reaching out like unfinished promises, was supposed to provide passage over the Nabaganga river – a vital line of communication for local residents. Instead, it has become a picture of "development gone wrong" thanks to poor planning, lax quality control, and negligence by officials that typically bedevil our infrastructure projects.

The story behind the incomplete structure is all too familiar: the first deadline for building the Kalia Bridge, as it is called, ended in June 2019, and over four years later, as our photo reveals, it is still nowhere near completion, leaving local residents with no option but to continuously rely on trawlers and ferries for daily commute. Officials have attributed the delay to a design flaw. It is tempting to accept this as business as usual, but we must be critical given how frequently this – the trend of faulty design and flawed feasibility studies – is happening. Building bridges over rivers is a costly business. There are high economic stakes involved, and citizens deserve answers for lofty development promises left unfulfilled. So we must ask: why did the authorities allow the Kalia Bridge problem for so long?

One of the primary concerns highlighted by this incident is the lack of effective project management and oversight. For any infrastructure project to succeed, it requires meticulous planning, rigorous execution, and constant monitoring. When these critical steps are bypassed or compromised, as seems to be the case with the Kalia Bridge, projects inevitably stall, leaving communities in limbo. Furthermore, the bridge serves as a reminder of the necessity for timely and adequate funding, the lack of which often hampers the progress of projects. Besides, corruption, inefficiency and other bureaucratic challenges can also lead to projects being revised and corners being cut, and ultimately, subpar outcomes.

The situation demands a multi-faceted response. But we must first stress the importance of establishing accountability and transparency in the management of development projects. Concerned officials must provide clear and honest explanations for delays, and corrective measures should be taken swiftly to ensure that mistakes are not repeated. If there were a functional checks-and-balance mechanism in place, there wouldn't be a flawed bridge design in the first place, and any flaw would have been quickly rectified, sparing taxpayers the burden of paying extra for development. We urge the authorities in Narail to quickly finish the Kalia Bridge project.

Pathway for Bangladesh's energy transition



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The energy and power sector of Bangladesh can be said to have entered its third phase of development. This phase is widely known as the energy transition phase where the country needs to shift its energy base from fossil fuel towards renewable energy-based infrastructure.

In the first phase, Bangladesh had limited energy and power demand matched by supply constraints. In the second phase, spanning the last one and a half decade, power generation has seen robust growth. Since May 2009, the installed capacity has increased from around 5GW to 27.4GW in May 2023 to meet the needs of the growing economy, including the booming garment and textile sector and the growing domestic and commercial sectors. Bangladesh has seen a sustained decline in the energy poverty of its populace in the last two decades.

Yet, given the graduation of depletion of known reserves which has been pushing the country towards imported fossil fuels to supply energy to the power plants and the industrial sector, a major shift to reduce dependency on domestic natural gas is necessary for Bangladesh. In the last two years, the unstable global energy market has sent shockwaves in the nation's energy and power sector.

It is precisely in such a context that Bangladesh needs to consider the next phase of its energy and power development saga. It needs to make a bid for energy transition and lift the sector from an existing baseline characterised by a few fundamental shortcomings, including problems of accessibility, equity, and sustainability.

Bangladesh clearly recognises the need for a transition towards a low-carbon energy and power sector that ensures the needs and rights of ordinary people including workers, women, and vulnerable groups. The country has several plans and commitments that underscore this approach. The Mujib Climate Prosperity Plan 2021 has set the target of generating 40 percent of electricity from renewable sources by 2041.

One key problem is the country's increasing entanglement in coal and liquefied natural gas (LNG) infrastructure. Bangladesh has built some new coal-based power plants over the last one decade with a capacity of 3GW and several coal-based power plants are in the pipeline which will add another 6.2GW capacity. A



The country's solar home systems programme could not achieve its desired impact due to lack of grassroots capacity and servicing.

PHOTO: REUTERS

similar rise in capacity will take place through the newly built LNG-based power plants. Consequently, the excess reserve in power generation, which stood at 36 percent in May, 2023, will reach as high as 50 percent by 2025. Such excess reserves mainly through private sector power plants have caused increasing payment of capacity charges, amounting to \$12.12 billion in the 2009-2023 period (considering an average rate of Tk.82.5 per dollar for 2009-2023).

A key plank of Bangladesh's recent energy related developments is the focus on imported LNG, a fuel that has seen extreme price volatility. Heavy investments are required for developing infrastructures for LNG, such as floating storage and regasification units. Furthermore, the recent draft of the integrated plan for energy and power seeks to ramp up LNG imports, which poses serious concerns regarding sustainability. Hence, the power sector is burdened with huge public debt, increasing financial losses and rising retail price of electricity at the consumers' end.

The structural requirement for energy transition

Financing will be a key requirement for energy transitions in Bangladesh.

fossil-fuel-based power plants; and new and innovative financing for renewable energy in generation, transmission, distribution and backward and forward-linkage parts of the supply chain.

National policies and incentives must be aligned to facilitate a just energy transition, including the three aspects mentioned above. The policies, guidelines and strategies pertaining to solar power, for example, often present mixed signals and disparate targets. It is important that investors get a clear and unified signal about the government's policy stance and intent on renewable energy development. The fiscal and financial policies should also clearly incentivise just energy transition. The existing 37 percent duty and taxes levied on the import of renewable energy components like solar inverters is a major bottleneck to renewable energy expansion. The central bank could review the existing green financing portfolio of the banking sector to design a more effective financial ecosystem supporting the energy transition.

The transition will also require capacity building of the key stakeholders including government officials, private sector organisations

and civil society organisations. Without proper knowledge and know-how, the transition can be delayed or chequered. The country's solar home systems programme could not achieve its desired impact due to the lack of grassroots capacity and servicing. Out of more than 5 million systems, only around 2 million are now in operation, the rest being out of operation due to various inadequacies.

Equally important will be a compliance and quality assurance infrastructure that ensures that the products and technology used in the energy transition have proper standards. Development of a grid-system which will be compatible with the variant and intermittent supply of energy from the renewable energy-based power plants is also important. Substandard technology can significantly impact the transition towards sustainable energy. In the solar home schemes, low quality batteries reportedly led to customer suffering. Failure to ensure proper quality can erode the confidence and interest of users as well as investors.

As Bangladesh moves towards a middle-income country status, its national development plan also needs to be aligned with its greater profile and larger ambitions. After making vast progress in recent decades, the energy and power sector is now poised to transition towards a more sustainable and inclusive model of development. This model will feature a lower-carbon and more environment friendly energy mix, and it will also ensure that marginalised social groups have adequate and fair access to energy and socioeconomic opportunities.

When you have Opinion Fatigue Syndrome



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RAFFAT BINTE RASHID

Whenever I am asked to give my opinion on something, I cringe. I suffer from an extreme case of Opinion Fatigue Syndrome, a condition where you get a sick feeling of dread every time someone asks for your opinion. Being a journalist adds to the pressure. It is as if I must have the information and facts to pass a comment or give an opinion on every issue under the sky: from the wildfires in Yellowstone in Canada to the green chilli price in Dhaka.

There are people who overhear or pick up from what others say and form their own vague half-baked opinions. Add to that list Facebook journalists, armchair intellectuals, micro-bloggers, and television talk show hosts. These kinds of "knowledgeable personalities" add to fear.

My best friend is one such person. She has strong views on every issue and has loads of judgement to pass.

She is tired of my lack of knowledge on local and world affairs. My child calls me braindead and that no one can have a decent intellectual conversation with me, because apparently I am not aware of my surroundings.

Yes, I have no opinion about Delwar Hossain Sayeedi being called *Din er Rahbar* or celebrity blow-ups of Porimoni. Or on bigger issues like why poor lending practices have led banks to a high level of Non-Performing Loans (NPL), how foreign exchange market instability is causing disruption in our daily lives, and why BRT bus stops are on the wrong side of the road.

What impact will my two cents of Facebook status have on these, I wonder. What real value is there in churning out impulsive and ill-conceived opinions for the masses to wolf down?

"I said this and that, I wrote a blog on it and it is the final word

on the subject" – this is the attitude of most people with strong views on social media or television talk shows. People with opinions have the authority to pass a judgement or start a public trial without considering the repercussions.

It's easier to push your opinions on the Internet, regardless of any actual comprehension, because the

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place is saturated with sentiments, thoughts, and judgements. A breakfast status is mandatory for your online presence – you have to jump on the bandwagon of what's brewing on that particular day to keep up with the times.

The fear of missing out (FOMO) is the reason why we need to chime

in on a trending newsy topic, be it political drama (of which there is no dearth in our society) or financial fiascos. It does not matter if we do not fully understand the topic of concern.

However, I unabashedly say that I know nothing or little on any subject rocking the net yesterday, today, or tomorrow! Yes, it makes me opinionatedly challenged. For me, it's tiring to act like I know everything or to fake myself as an intellectual. While everyone is thinking something about everything, I am not. I am burnt out from listening to or giving bogus views that make little or no sense to others who pretend to listen. When I strongly believe in an issue, I need time to dig into it and then decide to talk about it.

From the point of my "disability," I clearly see that we have made the Internet or social platforms a mess where we all talk over each other and no one is benefitting or listening.

Opinions are now the definitive truth beyond which the line of reason does not run. But I am afraid of making empty noise; I feel that it makes me look more foolish than having uninformed views about anything and everything.

I suffer from Opinion Fatigue Syndrome and I think it is okay.