

How did our air get even worse?

Govt can no longer ignore this growing health hazard

Despite the mounting evidence declaring Dhaka's air to be deadly, a new study by the Centre for Policy Dialogue (CPD) shows that all the statistics and warnings on air pollution over the years have fallen on deaf ears. We are concerned to find that since 2020, air pollution has actually increased by 13 percent. From 2018 to 2021, Dhaka remained the second most polluted city in the world, and even now, it continues to be among the cities with the worst air. These pollution figures translate into all kinds of disasters for people. The latest study has found that seven out of 10 Dhaka residents suffer from respiratory issues, like breathing problems and chest pain. All these health complications add up, with Bangladeshis losing almost seven years of life expectancy due to air pollution. According to a World Bank report, toxic air is killing around 80,000 people every year in the country.

Research shows that 30 percent of Dhaka's pollution originates from construction, 29 percent from brick kilns and factories, and 15 percent from vehicles. We are witnessing unprecedented levels of development work and industrial expansion in the hopes of bolstering the economy. But air pollution, brought on by this rampant growth, is squashing those very hopes. Last year, Dhaka residents took 2,117 days off work due to sickness attributable to air pollution, which of course does not bode well for the economy. In fact, the World Bank says air pollution is wiping out around four percent of the country's GDP.

As air pollution has been wreaking all kinds of havoc for so long, surely the government has incentives to address this critical issue, but the numbers belie this notion. In February, the High Court censured the government for not complying with a nine-point directive it issued in 2020 to curb air pollution in Dhaka. Some of the initiatives, like the 2012 Air Pollution Reduction Strategy, largely still remains on paper, and the Clean Air Act is yet to be enacted. At the end of last year, four South Asian countries – Bangladesh, India, Nepal and Pakistan – agreed to drastically curb air pollution, including transboundary pollution, by 2030. But clearly that is not bearing fruit as well.

The government has to get its priorities straight; it cannot keep on ignoring this health crisis and solely concentrate on infrastructure development for the sake of the economy. As air pollution is an all-encompassing issue, we urge all relevant ministries, divisions and departments of the government to address this menace collectively. The existent strategies, policies and acts must be implemented and enforced; only then would people breathe in fresh air again.

Can BCL always do as they please?

The ruling party must check BCL influence at public universities

That the Bangladesh Chhatra League (BCL) members have been exerting undue influence at public universities – intimidating and harassing students, teachers and staff members, engaging in criminal activities, and creating an environment of political repression while administrations turn a blind eye – should not come as a surprise to anyone. Time and again, we have seen media reports detailing such incidents. However, after recent events at Chittagong University (CU), one would think the situation had finally come to a head.

After clashes between rival BCL factions, the assault of a *Prothom Alo* journalist by BCL men and the recovery of weapons from one of the residential halls following a police search, the CU authorities issued a directive on September 24 ordering those who had finished their academic sessions and who had been expelled for their violent activities to vacate student halls within 24 hours. In the meantime, reports of the BCL's reign of terror at CU, which involved frequent clashes, extortion of contractors implementing development projects at the university, illegally occupying hall rooms, beating administrative officials, sexually harassing female students, vandalising university property and even threatening teachers, began to surface.

Despite all of these serious allegations, and the dissolution of its committee at Chittagong University by central BCL authorities, the order to vacate halls has so far been limited to paper. According to media reports, there are at least 30 BCL members who are inhabiting residential halls on university premises despite no longer being students, some of them for as long as 11 years! Such orders to vacate have also been issued before – most recently on February 27 – and have been promptly ignored in the past as well.

The blatant disregard for university authorities demonstrates just how easy it has become for BCL members to abuse their power on campuses. The continued political patronage they have received has allowed them to believe that the rules do not apply to them. Will the ruling party finally demonstrate their commitment to democratic principles and the rule of law by disciplining its student wing, and empowering the university authorities and law enforcement to take actions against them, or will BCL continue to enjoy this culture of impunity?

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

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Ensure mental well-being of students

Amid the academic whirlwind, students confront not only textbooks and exams but also an often-hidden foe: mental health issues. They may silently wrestle with anxiety, depression and more, yet outwardly appear fine, leading to underreporting and a lack of support. Therefore, educational institutions, students, families, and society must collaborate to create a supportive environment where students feel safe, prioritising their mental well-being.

Roksana Wazed
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NATIONAL GIRL CHILD DAY

We must radically reimagine girls' rights



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What would you consider to be a good life for a little girl? Would she be safe? Healthy? Would she have a roof over her head and food in her stomach? Would she be free from exploitation and abuse?

So far, I think everyone would agree that these are very basic rights that should be enjoyed not just by girls, but by every citizen in a democratic country. But unfortunately for Bangladeshi girls, even in 2023, there are a number of these very basic rights that we are still unable – and perhaps unwilling – to afford to them.

Should girls have education? Should they have sexual and reproductive rights? Do they have the right to refuse marriage? Do we respect their right to refuse, to give and to take away consent? Do they have bodily autonomy? What about agency, independence, and free will?

Of course, in reality, these are not simple things to achieve, and the situation is not so black and white. When trapped in poverty, struggling to recover from one climate-induced disaster after another, with the threat of sexual violence hanging over the heads of girls across the country, one can hardly pretend to have the luxury of choice. Often, the choices are child marriage, child labour, poverty or violence.

However, it also cannot be denied that the very same choices that even the most deprived boys and men are often faced with are simply not available to girls and women in similar situations. Nowhere is this contrast more stark than in the case of child marriages in Bangladesh.

According to a Unicef report from May, which pulled data from the Bangladesh Multiple Indicator Cluster Survey 2019, more than 51 percent of young women in the country were married in their childhood. This means that the country now potentially holds 38 million women and girls who were married before the age of 18. Among them, 13 million were married before the age of 15. This makes Bangladesh the country with the highest prevalence of child marriage in South Asia, and the eighth highest prevalence in the world.

Another report on child marriage from Bangladesh Mahila Parishad (BMP), which collected data from over 2,000 people in 37 districts from 2018 to 2021, found that 53 percent of the



ILLUSTRATION: REHNUMA PROSHOON

girls in question were forced to marry due to family and societal pressures. While there is no denying that poverty is still one of the greatest drivers of child marriage, instead of dealing with the circumstances – like natural disasters and gender-based violence – that are making our girls vulnerable, we tend to opt for the “easy” solution of marriage for the sake of economic solvency and safety. The fact that the Child Marriage Restraint Act, 2017 actually allows for child marriage under “special circumstances” is an example of this.

Traditional notions of honour, with “modesty” being the most valued asset owned by any woman or girl in the country, only make the situation worse. In our society, too many still consider “love marriages” and “affairs” to be morally more egregious than marital rape and teen pregnancies. While being forced into marriage is the worst case scenario, we cannot deny that in almost every aspect of a girl's life in Bangladesh – whether she is trying to participate in sports or use public transport – her “virtue” is constantly being scrutinised, effectively creating

local government body members were complicit. Kazis and notaries were also directly responsible.

While Bangladesh has a National Action Plan to Eliminate Child Marriage by 2030, which holds a number of lofty strategies that commit to justice, accountability, positive social values and norms, and the empowerment of adolescents, the reality is that there is a significant gap between our ambitions and our actions. In Digital Bangladesh, we have still not managed to properly digitise marriage registration, which would make it harder to falsify documents for child marriages. We want the future generations to take their fates into their own hands, but we are not willing to provide them with the sexual health education that would allow them to make informed decisions about their future. We believe in the constitutionally guaranteed gender equality, but we do not believe in women's right to inheritance, even though greater financial control would reduce their dependence on marriage as a means to economic stability.

Research suggests that child marriage begins to decline among

barrier here is the sexual harassment faced by girls and young women in educational institutions. In 2021, a national-level study from Plan International Bangladesh revealed that 73.8 percent of girls and women had faced such abuse. Yet, most schools have no functioning anti-sexual harassment cells or complaint committees to deal with this, despite there being clear directives from the High Court.

This does not only reflect a general apathy towards improving the lives of girls in Bangladesh, it demonstrates that those who are responsible for improving their lives are yet to take the first simple step of acknowledging that our girls are human beings with agency, not just vessels holding their families' and communities' reputations. It is clear that before we can take any real action in dealing with child marriage, there has to be a radical shift in how we as a nation perceive the rights of girls and women. This is necessary for us to finally see child marriage for what it is – not a tool to protect the “honour” of our young girls, but a form of sexual violence.

TVET and our skills ‘fetish’



EDUCATING EDUCATION

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It was a joyous celebration when I got GPA 5 in my SSC examination, as is the case in most homes in Bangladesh when the results of this milestone exam come out. I remember being sent to visit elderly relatives with sweets in the evening, a feeling of relief and content in my heart. Our driver *chacha* was also very happy, not only for my result but also for his son's result. His son had studied in a school in their village home far from Dhaka, and he had obtained GPA 5 too. His achievement, I knew, was more special than mine, because he had not studied with as many facilities as I had.

That day, both of us were celebrating the same achievement, but two things differed greatly between us – our journeys leading up to that point and our journeys from thereon. I wondered whether he, like me, was continuously being asked what I wanted to become, which field I was heading towards. Out of interest, I excitedly asked driver *chacha* what his son's aspirations were, and he replied with a fallen enthusiasm, “For him, there aren't

many options, *Ma*. He must quickly get a job. He's smart but the reality is that students like him, like me, need to be practical. I think he should just try to pick up a skill, in a vocational institution maybe.” I could almost hear the despair in his voice, his far-off look reminiscent of imagining his son being given the bright opportunities I would automatically be given. The air reeked of unfairness, and I didn't feel so proud anymore. Why was I entitled to more options than someone my age, just as talented as me, just because I was born to more privilege?

If you look closely, you will find, like I have, that there is an inherent bias in our thinking when we imagine the aspirations and career trajectories of students from different socio-economic backgrounds. While who chooses to pursue technical and vocational education and training (TVET) as an educational route over general or religious education is an important question, an equally important – if not more important – question is for whom TVET was imagined. Also, who gets to

make these decisions of who goes to which education stream? Is it the case that only a handful of our elite and powerful are making these decisions for countless lives without often hearing or understanding the voices of different groups? Indeed, it very well may be that there is an underrepresentation of voices in this sort of decision-making, especially at the topmost levels. At the end of the day, the question that becomes important is whether there is a “privilege” factor at play within the system and, thereby, an inherent bias and inequality in our thinking. We must ask, and answer, why privilege or poverty should filter individuals into either TVET or general education.

The TVET route is undoubtedly a necessary educational option for countries like Bangladesh that are looking to “upskill” and turn humans into “human capital.” However, it's important to remember the “human” part of it and not get lost in the “capital” of it all. The most common and established narratives around education and skills today is that we need to invest more in TVET, and we need to “attract” and “normalise” pursuing TVET. But do we mean for everyone or only for the lesser privileged? Would we send our own children to TVET?

Also, it's important to be aware of the origins of TVET and the global, more Western, push for countries in the Global South to strongly promote TVET. Sadly, there is little criticality from the receiving end – from us.

The possibility that too much and blind focus on TVET may have more cons than pros rarely comes to our mind. We, the Global South, in a way, are still colonised in our minds by the Global North because we blindly follow their lead without realising that our context, culture and history are different from theirs. There's also a lot to think about in terms of what we mean by skills and whether the more “one size fits all” approach of TVET is the right step towards the right direction. Educationist Lisa Wheelahan talks about this in her article on the reification of skills and identifies one of the key issues as the fetishisation of skills, meaning that we have turned the need for skills into more of a fetish without understanding what we actually mean by the term. Then there's the related nuances that we remain unaware of – who should have what skills, what skills are the need of the time, and for what type of work. All this has led to the reification, as Wheelahan et al (2022) calls it, of the whole concept.

There's something wrong in the way we've been thinking of these educational routes in Bangladesh, and we must change our thinking if we want to match our actions to what we say about inclusive development. For any inclusive development to be indeed inclusive, we must first learn to imagine all of us on a same-level platform, deserving of the same educational opportunities and the same standard quality of life.