



The productivity of labour relies on technology, working environment, management, training, wages, nutrition, and leisure—all of which must be ensured by the employer.

PHOTO: AFP

Why should RMG workers toil to live below the poverty line?



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KALLOL MUSTAFA

The Citizen Charter of the Minimum Wage Board states that the board's vision and mission are to fix minimum wages for the purpose of improving the standard of living of all workers in the private sector. But does it fulfil its mission? The poor minimum wages set for different sectors imply otherwise. The fact that the minimum wage board serves the interests of the factory owners and industrialists has again become evident in the recent fixing of only Tk 12,500 as minimum wage for RMG workers, in compliance with the proposal made by factory owners against the demand of Tk 23,000 to Tk 25,000 by the workers.

Garment factory owners in Bangladesh have long been enjoying favours and benefits from the government. More than 60 percent of lawmakers in parliament are businessmen, a significant number of whom are garment factory owners. As a result of this state-business nexus, all the government functionaries, from the labour ministry to the law enforcement agencies, always prioritise protecting the interests of factory owners. When the workers took to the streets to protest the minimum wage of only Tk 12,500, a large number of police, Rab, and BGB personnel were deployed to suppress them. So far, two garment workers have been killed by law and order forces in the ongoing labour movement demanding liveable wages. Instead of revising the minimum wage as demanded by the workers, the government and the owners are trying to suppress the movement by attacking workers, suing them, arresting them, closing down factories, and threatening a hiring halt.

But how acceptable is this minimum wage of Tk 12,500? As per the official dollar rate, Tk 12,500 is equal to \$113. But the informal rate is much higher. If one dollar is considered equal to Tk 120, the minimum wage then stands at \$104. In 2018, when the minimum wage was fixed at Tk 8,000, the average dollar rate was Tk 83.87. As a result, in dollar terms, the minimum wage in 2018 was \$95. So, in five years, the minimum

wage of RMG workers increased by only \$9-\$18.

Be it \$104 or \$113, they are much lower than the minimum wage of garment workers in any of the countries competing against Bangladesh in the international market. According to a study by the Centre for Policy Dialogue (CPD), the minimum wage in the RMG sectors of Vietnam, India, Cambodia, and Indonesia are, respectively, \$170, \$171, \$200, and \$243. If factory owners from other countries exporting to the same international market can afford to pay \$170 to \$243 to their workers, why can't our garment owners, who enjoy various discounts and benefits from the government, do the same?

Our RMG workers' minimum wage is also significantly lower than that in some local sectors as well. For example, the minimum wage in sawmills, the shipbreaking industry, and the construction and carpentry sectors are Tk 17,900, Tk 16,000, and Tk 16,240, respectively. However, garment factory owners receive more benefits from the government than owners in any other private industry of the country, including tax and VAT rebates, cash incentives, low-interest loans from the Export Development Fund (EDF), and duty-free import of raw materials.

According to a report published in *Prothom Alo*, while other industries have to pay corporate taxes ranging from 20 to 45 percent, the tax rate for garment factories is 10 to 12 percent. In the 2020-21 fiscal year, a total of Tk 3,483 crore tax rebate was given to the RMG, textiles and related sectors. In FY 2019-20, Tk 1,51,738 crore of duty tax exemption was given under the bond facility, of which about 80 percent was given to the RMG sector.

Currently, garment exporters receive a five percent cash incentive when exporting apparel items made from locally procured raw materials, an additional four percent cash incentive for exporting to non-traditional markets, and another one percent cash incentive for exporting to all countries. According to an OECD and

United Nations report, for FY 2022-23, the total estimated cost of export cash incentives in Bangladesh amounted to Tk 7,550 crore, of which 65 percent was for the garments and textiles industry.

Despite receiving so many concessions and benefits from the government for years, RMG factory owners are not giving their employees the fair share, due to which the workers have to suffer dearly. A recent survey conducted by the Asia Floor Wage Alliance (AFWA) revealed that workers in our garment sector are consuming just 1,950 kcal in food using Tk 120 per day. But the calorie requirement for a healthy worker living above the poverty line is at least 2,200 kcal. With the recently announced minimum wage of Tk 12,500, it will not be possible for RMG workers to rise above the poverty line because, according to calculations by economist Anu Muhammad, to get 2,200 kcal per person at the market price during September, a family of four would have had to spend at least Tk 23,000 on food alone that month.

Garment factory owners often cite low labour productivity as an excuse for the low wages they offer to workers. But the productivity of labour relies on technology, working environment, management, training, wages, nutrition, and leisure—all of which must be ensured by the employer. According to the Global Alliance for Improved Nutrition (GAIN), 43 percent of female workers in the RMG sector are suffering from malnutrition. If these workers get adequate nourishment, their productivity would rise by 20 percent. According to a survey by the CPD, only two percent of the firms in the garments industry spend on research and development, and their expenditure per worker is only Tk 206, which is alarmingly low considering the size and prominence of the sector. In contrast, the R&D expenditure per worker in the pharmaceutical, tobacco, and paper industries is Tk 23,745, Tk 1,858 and Tk 1,627, respectively. If there is low productivity in the RMG sector, factory owners have only themselves to blame. By not paying workers the wages necessary to afford a decent life, depriving them of rest/leisure, forcing them to work more overtime hours, and not investing enough in workers' training and research, factory owners themselves are causing low labour productivity. Workers should not suffer day after day, toiling under the poverty line, to serve the endless greed and shortsightedness of Bangladesh's RMG factory owners.

Ethics, happiness, and mental health for education



EDUCATING EDUCATION
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I lost a friend in university; one of my closest friends. I remember going through a really hard time when I lost him. It was then that my CGPA dropped. Even then, I was privileged, because there were so many students around me going through much worse: the loss of a parent, the financial fight to make ends meet far away from home, a downward spiralling CGPA, and a general feeling of despair with nobody to turn to for support. All around us, life went on, through politics (external and internal), the rat race for good grades, and beyond. Sometimes, we all just seemed—to varying degrees—helpless and lost.

When I became a teacher, I realised that nothing had changed, and these feelings came back to haunt me. There was still no system in place to ensure students', or teachers', mental well-being. It seemed, as was the case in our time, that the establishment believed that mental health and well-being weren't very important in the greater scheme of things.

concepts that we cannot disconnect from education: ethics, happiness, and mental well-being. They aren't directly linked to education, some may say, but I argue that they are. These three aspects are at the core of any education, especially a good education, and we need to start seriously framing our education narrative around these aspects, even if we have to start anew. There can be no proper education without bringing humanity into the equation. And undoubtedly, to be humane, one must be ethical, mentally well, and happy.

But do we even expect that education will lead to strong ethics, good mental health, and happiness? Are educated people more ethical? Are they happier? Sadly, we can't claim that being educated means that someone is ethical or that they're happy. On the contrary, it is too often the more educated that are astoundingly the most unethical. At the end of the day, the basic essence of ethics—of what is right, and what is wrong—is simple. It's not to harm

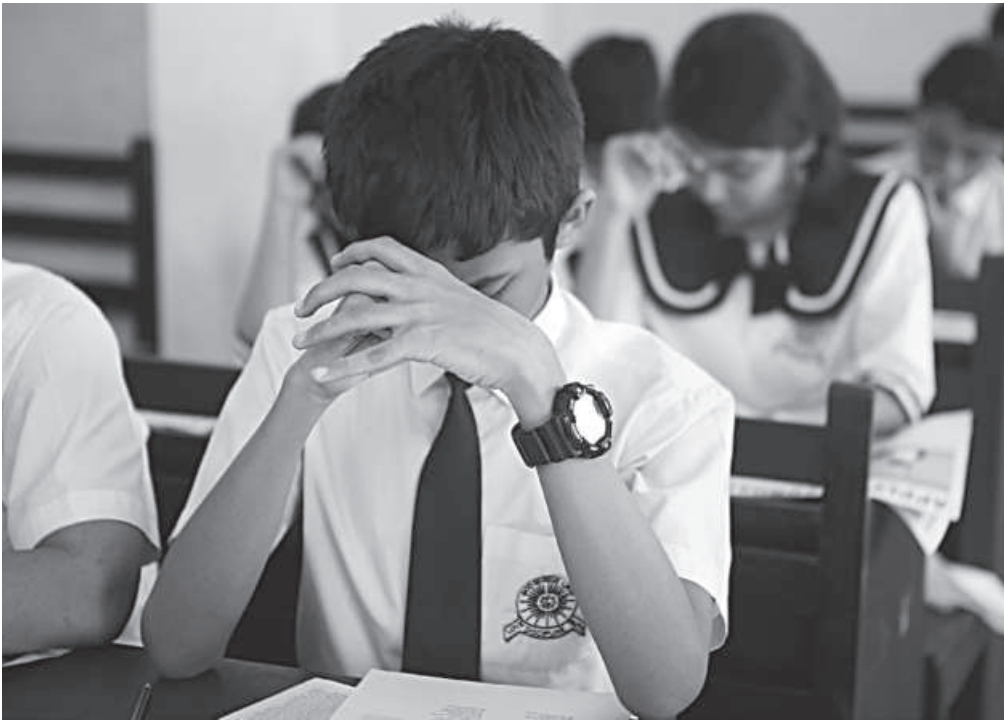


PHOTO: ORCHID CHAKMA

There can be no proper education without bringing humanity into the equation.

All that mattered, all that was expected from us, was productivity. We were, after all, the “demographic dividend” of the country. We were the future, the promise, the hope. I guess we still are.

This is why I'd like to ask our policymakers and all those in positions of power: did you expect the demographic dividend to become productive, without factoring in whether they are happy or not? How can we expect our youth to be productive when we're not even sure that they're okay? Undeniably, being okay or being happy is a precursor of productivity. But we seemed to have expected that we could get by without asking each other how we are, by only focusing on pushing our youngsters towards high grades, salaries, and social status.

Times are even harder now. The world is more troubled than ever before and it is sometimes extremely difficult to function normally, let alone study and show up for exams. It is difficult to function, witnessing injustice all around us, seeing people who wrong others and cut corners achieving positions of power, and seeing people desperately cling to that power at the cost of ethics and morality. It is nearly impossible to be unaware of some part of the world burning, of people dying, of injustice happening often much closer to home, or even at home. Life selfishly goes on; classes and exams continue—as they must, for we cannot afford to stop. Such is the harsh practicality of life. What we can do, however, is care for each other.

For our education system, it is high time to portray stronger norms and practices around well-being and mental health. Our schools, colleges, and universities, besides our homes, need to be safe spaces too—for everyone, and not only for people of a particular ideology. It's high time to invest in employing strong mechanisms and institutions so that someone in pain—be it a student or a teacher—can reach out for help. Our educational institutions need to prioritise this, and we need to look out for every child, for every student.

When a student is in a place of despair, on the brink of taking their own life, what does one do as a teacher? We need to think about these things now more than ever. We need to prioritise well-being and mental health as much as we prioritise grades and productivity. They go hand-in-hand, and it's time we acknowledge that.

There are three overarchingly powerful

anyone or anything, and to not take what is rightfully someone else's.

As my mother-in-law taught my husband and his siblings, it means to not take away anyone's “*hok*” (right). Taking away someone's right could include stealing a fallen fruit from somebody else's garden or bribing one's way into a position that rightfully belonged to somebody more qualified. It could mean using or misusing one's power to cut the line when there are people who had been queued up for hours before you. It means taking away people's right to vote. Should an “educated” person not find it more difficult to steal someone else's *shok*? Should an education not manifest the urge to resist temptations for higher gain, power, and money? The uneducated and unethical most likely never had the opportunities someone with an education had. So what is the excuse of the educated for being unethical? Why do the powerful, the educated, take the most bribes?

Education is meant to be an equaliser because ethics is an equaliser. When it comes to what's right, when it comes to a world where there are strong institutions in place, we are all equal. These institutions are the reason why corrupt CEOs get voted out of their companies by their boards, why people in power cannot do whatever they want to whenever they want to. And if they can, then there is something very wrong going on in that sphere. If we want our education and our educated to be representative of rightness, goodness, and kindness, we need to reform our approach to education, and consequently, our entire education system.

Though we celebrate the achievers, we forget to lift up others who fall behind. Be it Bangla medium, English medium, or Madrasah, if we send a happy, positive spirited child into our education system, 15 to 20 years later, there's a good chance they'll come out the other side scarred and unhappy. Any curiosity that an individual harbours when entering university is usually squashed by pressure and unrealistic expectations.

We don't nurture passion; we don't feed curiosity. We don't prioritise well-being and happiness. We only demand brilliance, without realising that brilliance without either well-being or happiness, and without passion or curiosity, is often like a caged bird. It will brilliantly mimic what you teach it; but when it's let out of the cage, it won't be able to do what it was meant to do best. It won't be able to fly.

CROSSWORD BY THOMAS JOSEPH

ACROSS

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12 Dazzle

13 Peace goddess

14 Stood up

15 Swindle

16 Memory loss

18 Bulldog backer

19 June honoree

20 Sort

21 Dispatched

23 Minimal change

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27 Cloth scrap

28 Patron saint of young girls

30 Use incisors

33 Ga. Neighbor

34 Collar

36 Thurman of film

37 Search (through)

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28 Reunion group

29 Droop

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35 Floppy top

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42 Longoria of TV

YESTERDAY'S ANSWERS

ACME GROUP
HOAX GROUSE
ARIA LOOTER
BELLHOPS
TUBETOPS
ASSETS MOE
GOODS RAISE
ELL HALTER
SODAPOPS
DUSTMOPS
SILENT IBET
ADOPTS TOTE
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