

We must protect our female migrants

Alarming findings about abuse, exploitation deserve proper response

Even within our large, typically low-skilled migrant workforce that seldom gets the support or recognition necessary, female workers represent a particularly vulnerable segment. Just how vulnerable they are can be understood from a recent study of the Bangladesh National Woman Lawyers' Association (BNWLA). Its findings are chilling: a staggering 37.3 percent of female migrants returned home with empty pockets, having been deprived of rightful wages. More alarming is the fact that 17.1 percent had to escape due to physical and sexual abuses. This shows the harrowing conditions that many women face within the confines of their employers' homes.

Since 1991, some 1.17 million women are estimated to have gone abroad for work, mostly as domestic workers. Besides, they are also engaged in caregiving, healthcare, cleaning, garments manufacturing, etc. According to the BNWLA, in 73 percent of cases, women choose to migrate due to economic and social vulnerabilities. Their desperation should not be a gateway to exploitation; yet the narrative that often emerges from host countries, particularly in the Middle East, is that of sufferings, shattered dreams, and haunting memories of abuse. Many end up pregnant, or scarred in other ways, or even dead. Their eventual return home, far from being a cathartic experience, also means a return to the same vulnerabilities that made them leave in the first place.

Another factor adding to this grim reality is the underreporting of sexual abuse due to fear of societal repercussions. The BNWLA study also says that half of the returnees didn't seek legal aid for the abuse and exploitations they suffered. Their lack of awareness or knowledge of where to seek help, as well as the absence of adequate support systems, exacerbate their vulnerability, leaving them stranded in a cycle of exploitation. The question is, why should this be the fate of a workforce that significantly contributes to our economy?

Addressing this situation is not easy because of the multiple factors involved. But we must try, and must demand results from concerned government agencies. Since many of the crimes involve both home and host countries, there must be collaborations among nations to ensure accountability, including bilateral agreements safeguarding the rights and safety of migrant workers. Equally crucial is the provision of robust support systems, legal aid, skills development training, and awareness campaigns to empower female migrants and prevent any exploitation. It's time to lift the veil of silence, amplify their voices, and ensure that migration for women doesn't equate to abuse.

Solar power falls victim to corruption

Bribe-taking officials and leaders in CHT must be brought to book

The people of Rangamati, Bandarban and Khagrachhari were eagerly waiting to say goodbye to their electricity troubles, as they were set to receive free solar panels under a government initiative. However, as we have seen time and again, such well-intentioned initiatives often don't pan out as expected due to corruption. According to a report, locals, who are mostly poor, are being forced to pay Tk 300 7,000 in bribes to get a set of panels. This is absolutely unacceptable.

The project, undertaken by the CHT Development Board to bring all of Chittagong Hill Tracts (CHT) under electricity coverage, intends to distribute 65,000 solar systems in the three districts. Unfortunately, corrupt officials, ruling party leaders, and brokers are barring many from enjoying its fruits. By taking bribes, concerned officials and leaders are essentially working against the interests of their own communities, which just shows how ineligible they are to serve the people.

Without access to electricity, households are being deprived of a facility that can change lives, as education, businesses, and people's lifestyle in general are immensely dependent on it. Meanwhile, solar power has the potential to bridge this accessibility gap efficiently, because it can easily be deployed in hard-to-reach areas, without the need to run kilometres of cables. This renewable source is also an essential ally in the battle against climate change, as it can help bring emissions down by 45 percent within 2030, and reach net zero by 2050, as called for in the Paris Agreement. Despite this potential, the authorities seem quite nonchalant about the irregularities that are taking place.

Bangladesh has set ambitious targets in terms of renewable energy. It has pledged to generate 40 percent of electricity from renewable sources by 2041, a large percentage of which will be produced through solar power. But can we reach these targets if the administration can't even ensure that its own people are aligned with these goals? If such incidents continue, the promise of access to electricity for all will remain unfulfilled.

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

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Pollution in Baridhara Lake Park

I am a resident of Dhaka North and frequently walk in the Lake Park in Baridhara. The park is green and its walkways are wonderful. But a foul smell emanates from the lake water, caused by the discharge of untreated sewage into the water from the Baridhara area. I urge the authorities to at least treat the sewage before dumping it into the lake and to make the park an all-around pleasant place to visit.

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Has BNP served its supporters well?

Boycotting of 2 elections in 10 years

THE THIRD VIEW

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So far, we have written a lot about the general election and how the ruling party and the present government have miserably failed (in fact, they never really tried) to create an appropriate atmosphere for a free and fair election. We have also written highly critical pieces regarding the way in which they have treated the main opposition, BNP, with hundreds sentenced, thousands arrested, and many thousands more on the run to stay out of the police's clutches. Our legal system stands weaponised to punish the dissenters, with the police having been given full immunity to misuse their powers to punish, harass and intimidate political opponents, terrorising them beyond belief.

But what about the other side? Did BNP play its part in living up to the wishes of its workers, leave alone the wishes of the people who are dissatisfied with the government and disillusioned with the Awami League? Was BNP's decision to boycott the election taken in any consultative manner, or was it simply imposed on the party workers?

Given the tradition of anti-incumbency among our voters, the unending stories of misuse of power, corruption, and the nepotism in AL, it is not unreasonable to think that people may have wanted a change. Did BNP build on that? Our own reporters' briefings, the studies that remain unpublished for fear of reprisal, and the rumoured intelligence reports all suggest that support for the opposition was considerable, if not overwhelming. What did BNP do with that support?

Immediately after the 2018 election, BNP declared that it would not participate in any future election under the AL regime, and demanded a caretaker government. Its division-level mobilisation late last year resulted in massive rallies despite severe obstacles, such as transport strikes and various impediments imposed by the government. It gave the BNP and its sympathisers the impression that the party's campaign was bearing fruit. However, perhaps missing in its calculation was how overwhelming the governmental response would be, and when it came, how BNP would tackle it. Alarmed by the public support for BNP, the ruling party unleashed all sorts of undemocratic and extralegal measures to curb the opposition. The actions post-October 28—most oppressive, by any standard—severely affected the BNP's capacity to continue its programmes. The arrest of the party's secretary general, followed by arrests of many top BNP leaders (and with the rest being kept on the run), literally incapacitated this massive party.

To put it simply: BNP launched a movement to oust AL from power—demanding a caretaker government

amounts to that—without adequate preparation, and this is now becoming more and more evident. The BNP failed to reap anything effective from the huge public support that it was able to garner late last year.

BNP also made the fatal mistake of not having a Plan B. Demanding Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina's removal from power was bound to trigger retaliation. There seems to have been no clear thinking on how to survive that. If the purpose was to loosen the incumbents' hold on the election mechanism, there could have been proposals for power-sharing during elections, or select portfolios being given to the opposition or neutral people under some constitutional arrangement



With BNP leaders and activists in hiding to avoid arrest, the party office in Dhaka's Nayapaltan area has been locked for weeks now.

FILE PHOTO: SAJJAD HOSSAIN

agreed to by both sides. Since the role of police is the key during elections, there could have been special proposals for reducing the ruling party's hold on them. Alternative views would have shown voters that BNP was flexible and open to negotiations. Shutting down all prospects of this was another vital mistake on the BNP's part. This is where the "external pressure" that the BNP was counting on felt completely let down. In all the talks that the BNP had with ambassadors, none supported the idea of an election under a caretaker government, while all insisted on the need for a free and fair election, for Bangladesh's own democratic future. BNP did not absorb this message.

It can be argued that AL never really wanted BNP in the poll contest in the first place, and that BNP never realised that its boycott was actually serving

boycotting two elections over a span of one decade. Could this situation present an existential problem for the BNP?

BNP's approach appears to be that, unless assured of victory, the party deems it of no use to participate in the election—a fatal mistake, in our view. The advantage of being a powerful opposition never seems to have appealed to BNP. It did not consider that the parliament would provide a powerful forum through which to propagate its own policies and visions for the future, and thereby create an image of it as a viable alternative.

The truth is, however sad and damaging it may have been for the growth of parliamentary democracy in Bangladesh, neither of our two big parties ever took the role of being the opposition seriously. Both AL and BNP

public mind. If nothing else, BNP's campaign itself would have had some sobering effect on the ruling party. Its participation would have encouraged foreign observers to take notice, which definitely would have helped to make our election better.

Today, BNP supporters are nothing more than mere onlookers as village after village prepares for the polls, now buoyed by the participation of AL's "rebel" candidates.

Today, all BNP can do is call hartals that nobody follows, enforce blockades which are nowhere to be seen, and declare mass protests that are practically non-existent. All that the opposition on the streets are able to do is create disruptions, which further raise questions about its success.

What a pitiable state to be in for our second-largest political party.

Empowering women, sustaining the environment

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The symbiotic relationship between women and the environment has been taken into serious consideration recently in Bangladesh. Despite the country's amazing geographical landscape, its vulnerability to frequent natural disasters and other environmental challenges is well-known. Amid these multifaceted challenges, there is a story of interconnectedness of women and the environment.

Women in rural areas often bear the responsibility of collecting water, fuelwood and food. Women are also closely engaged in agriculture and farming. As climate change is becoming the order of the day, leading to extreme weather events frequently, access to resources like water, fuelwood and food is becoming challenging. This also jeopardises crop yields in many areas. For instance, the coastal regions of Bangladesh are experiencing rising

sea levels, leading to salinity intrusion and the degradation of arable land. Women who rely on agriculture for their livelihoods are hit the hardest.

In response, some organisations have stepped in to equip women with the knowledge and tools needed to cultivate climate-resilient crop varieties and practise sustainable agriculture. This not only helps women adapt to the shifting environmental landscape but also bolsters food security. Some of the organisations provide training to and, in some cases, employ women to install and maintain solar panels in the country's off-grid areas. The link between renewable energy and women's economic empowerment is thus strengthened.

Another critical domain where women in Bangladesh play a central role is water management. Many parts of the country have been facing a water crisis in recent years. Women often bear the responsibility to manage safe water for their families and thus are affected by the challenges related to the water crisis. For this, many development projects promote women's involvement in decision-making and water resource management, underscoring the vital link between women and the preservation of safe water.

In Bangladesh, women are also

regularly at the forefront of disaster preparedness and relief activities. NGOs such as the Bangladesh Red Crescent Society have recognised and harnessed the resilience and resourcefulness of women in managing these crises. They train women in disaster response and risk reduction, effectively creating a network of local environmental first responders.



Moving to the urban setting, where women's health and well-being are disproportionately impacted by air pollution and poor waste management, the intersection of gender and environmental issues is particularly important. Women who work in the informal waste management sector in Dhaka, for instance, are not provided with adequate sanitation facilities and are subjected to hazardous conditions. There are initiatives that are addressing these challenges by promoting sustainable waste management practices and providing

safe working conditions.

The intersection of women and the environment goes beyond immediate challenges. It extends to the broader context of women's participation in decision-making processes related to environmental policies and practices. Women's voices are essential in shaping sustainable and equitable development. Countries in the South Asian region, like Nepal, have made progress in this regard, with women participating in community forestry management and biodiversity conservation efforts. In addition, a recent study showed that the increased participation of women farmers in decision-making can benefit farming productivity as well as conservation.

It is clear that the intricate web of interconnectedness and intersection between women and the environment in Bangladesh demands our attention and action. Communities that are resilient and innovative will benefit by utilising women's potential as agents of change in terms of environmental sustainability. By promoting gender-inclusive policies and initiatives, we can support women's empowerment while also fostering environmental sustainability and laying the groundwork for a more sustainable future.