

The Daily Star

FOUNDER EDITOR: LATE S. M. ALI

Migrating to a life of unemployment

End the exploitation, hold those responsible to account

Back in 2022, we hailed Malaysia's decision to reopen its labour market to Bangladeshi workers as a positive development that would change the lives of aspiring migrants in the country. We are horrified to learn that many of their lives have, indeed, changed dramatically—only for the worse. According to a recent report by this daily, tens of thousands of Bangladeshi men were enticed by the prospect of jobs and fair pay under relaxed recruitment policies in Malaysia, only to find themselves among the ranks of the unemployed upon arrival.

Take the story of Jahirul, for example, who spent Tk 5 lakh to go to Malaysia seven months ago. He was promised a job with a construction company in Kuala Lumpur and a minimum wage of 1,500 Malaysian ringgit (about Tk 35,000 or \$320). However, since his arrival, he has been locked up in a hotel room with other migrant workers and given rice and lentils twice a day, without any work or pay. Jahirul said he was one of 600 others hired by the same company. With over 400,000 Bangladeshis making the journey to Malaysia since the reopening of the labour market, a staggering number now find themselves facing unemployment, underpayment, and mounting debts, perpetually tortured by the thought of how they are letting down their families at home.

The exploitation extends beyond economic hardship, with companies withholding passports and trapping workers in dependency and vulnerability, as they risk becoming illegal residents if they leave the confines of the hotel. While some have sought recourse through complaints to Malaysia's Labour Department, the path to justice remains uncertain. Despite assurances from Bangladeshi authorities and promises of support from the high commission, tangible action has been elusive for those trapped in this cycle of exploitation.

Meanwhile, the Bangladeshi authorities do not even seem to know how many might be facing such a horrific fate in Malaysia. While some independent researchers say the number of such Bangladeshis range between 100,000 and 200,000, the Bangladesh High Commission in Malaysia and the Bangladesh Association of International Recruiting Agencies (BAIRA) say the number stands at a few thousands.

Who is to blame for this dire situation? It lies with a system that prioritises profit over human dignity, allowing unscrupulous employers and companies to exploit regulatory loopholes for financial gains. The failure to adequately regulate the influx of foreign workers has exacerbated an already precarious situation, leaving many to suffer the consequences. The companies and recruiting agents who are trapping workers with such false promises must be identified on an urgent basis before more aspiring migrants' dreams and lives are shattered. It is imperative that both Malaysian and Bangladeshi authorities take swift and decisive actions to address this humanitarian crisis. The rights and dignity of migrant workers must be upheld, and those responsible for their exploitation must be held to account.

Why are women farm workers still paid less?

Bridge the pay gap, bring agricultural work under labour law

It is disappointing that although women perform a major portion of agricultural work in the country, their male counterparts receive higher pay than them. For instance, with rice production, research has found that out of the 23 stages, women participate in 17. Male farm workers earn Tk 450 per day while female farm workers get Tk 300. Such glaring discrimination in wages continues even though more women are joining the agriculture sector in Bangladesh. A Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics (BBS) labour survey has calculated that around 1.84 crore women work in various kinds of agricultural work.

A recent report in this daily stated that landowners have a financial incentive to hire women workers because they can pay them less and hence hire more farmhands, which speeds up the production process. Thus the exploitation of women farm workers continues, mainly because women are afraid they will lose their jobs if they say anything against the wage discrepancy. A shrinking job market in the non-farming sector, especially the garment industry, which has been the biggest employer of women, is a major factor behind the increase in women workers in the agricultural sector. The increasing cost of living in the city, lack of security and poor pay in the informal sector where wages are arbitrarily determined—all these elements have caused women to opt for agricultural work.

But despite their hard work and their huge contribution to family income, some are heads of the household, they do not have equal rights or control over land. They also do not have any union to protect their rights and raise voices against wage discrimination.

We must eliminate this age-old wage discrimination between genders and correct the erroneous perception that women work less than men and therefore should be paid less. The government should form a policy that will offer fair and equal wages to all agricultural workers regardless of their gender. In addition, the labour law should regulate wages for agricultural workers, ensuring fair and equal pay for everyone. All agricultural workers must also have the right to organise themselves and demand fair wages, among other rights.

New Message

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Why do people stash dollars under pillows?



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The Bangladesh Bank (BB) governor, while addressing an event at the Bangladesh Institute of Bank Management (BIBM) on March 7, expressed deep concern about some people hoarding the US dollars under their pillows. It reminds one of the reappearance of 16th century Gresham's law in a different form. Thomas Gresham claimed that bad money drives good money out of circulation. Many high-income families in Bangladesh seem to have stashed more dollars in their homemade portfolios by getting rid of taka in exchange.

People during the barter age used to satisfy their needs by exchanging goods without using any kind of money as a medium of exchange. The limitations of the barter system led people to devise some common items—such as salt, stones, metals, silver, gold and the like—to use as facilitators of commodity transactions. In England, currencies like silver and gold coins were in circulation in the 16th century. Queen Elizabeth I noticed that only silver coins stayed in circulation while gold coins suddenly disappeared. Worried, the queen summoned her financial agent Sir Thomas Gresham to figure out why it had happened. Gresham hypothesised that coins with two different intrinsic values cannot coexist; less-valued coins will remain in the market while people will hide high-valued coins for the future. Some people's practice of holding dollars is a new form of Gresham's law because the US dollar's market value is adequately higher than the BB-assigned value, creating some scopes for profit-making. People work for self-interest, as economist Adam Smith affirmed.

While the BB governor seemed to have disapproved of this hoarding practice, the responsibility falls on the central bank's wrong policy of sticking to the unjust, non-market price of the dollar, the market value of which outweighs its stipulated price of Tk 110. The market price of the US dollar is above Tk 120, and that very difference induces the speculative savers to keep dollars under their pillows for future gains. Despite some warnings or normative calls from the government, investors will continue to possess dollars so long as it is worth



ILLUSTRATION: BIPOLO CHAKROBORTY

doing so. For rational financial agents, economists find nothing wrong with that; wrong policy causes people to take the right actions, although society labels them as "wrong."

In early 2009, when the US economy was in a deep recession, President Barack Obama urged Americans to continue spending and not "stuff money in their mattresses." The word "mattresses" later was misused and derided by the Republicans. Michael Barone, an economist at the American Enterprise Institute, wrote an article lamenting that the Obama economy had sent Americans to their mattresses. He went that far to suggest that investors buy big mattresses, stuff money in them, and lie down to get some rest. Paul Krugman, the Nobel Memorial Prize-winning liberal economist, asserted that people increased keeping cash dollars in mattresses during the Great Depression in the 1930s. JM Keynes theorised that savings are a vice particularly during the recession when more consumption is required

investing in stocks or bonds looked bleak. Similarly, some Bangladeshis find holding on to dollars not only profitable for now, but for so long as the central bank's dollar price remains starkly undervalued. The governor asserted that BB would not align the dollar's price with the kerb market just because the market is small. That is not correct—nor is it a good logic. The kerb market is just the tip of the iceberg. No matter how big or small the market is, its signals are worth honouring since they originate from the interaction of demand and supply. The nation is paying the price in both inflation and the dollar crisis simply because Bangladeshi policymakers remained stubbornly defiant to the market signals in determining both interest and exchange rates.

That did not happen for Sri Lanka and India, who have largely stabilised their foreign exchange reserves. The Reserve Bank of India (RBI) governor does not have any concerns as to whether Indians are stuffing dollars under their pillows since the dollar

or medicines will work to restore a healthy volume of reserves unless the dollar price mostly reflects the kerb market.

Bangladesh's inflation is now 9.7 percent, while it is 3.1 percent in the US, creating an inflation differential of 6.6 percent. It endorses depreciating pressures on the taka by more than six percent annually to keep the real effective exchange rate close to the index value of 100. The taka's depreciation against the US dollar will increase remittances and export earnings by improving export competitiveness. As the Fed chair Jerome Powell testified to Congress on March 6 and did not promise any rate cut soon, the economy signals a strong dollar globally. The inflation-led pressures on Bangladesh's taka and BB's undervaluation of the dollar are jointly encouraging clever investors and savers to keep on raising the altitude of pillows by stuffing more dollars under them. The ballooning of pillows is likely to continue unless BB ensures fair pricing for the dollar.

Time for Bangladesh to withdraw CEDAW reservations



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Bangladesh ratified the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) in 1984, a worldwide human rights charter specifically for women. Every individual, irrespective of sex, has some inherent and unquestionable rights. However, women all around the world have been—and still are—subjected to judgement and manipulation as their rights and positions are denied, including economic, social, educational, and other fundamental freedoms. CEDAW, as a comprehensive treaty on the rights of women, establishes legally binding obligations upon state parties in order to eradicate discrimination against women for ensuring parity between men and women.

While Bangladesh has ratified CEDAW, it maintains reservations on Articles 2 and 16.1(c). Article 2 concerns the modification of social and cultural patterns to eliminate prejudices and practices that are based on the idea of inferiority or superiority of either sex. Article 16.1(c) pertains to equal rights and responsibilities in marriage and divorce, including the right to choose a spouse and enter into marriage only with free and full consent. The

two articles are considered the core provisions of the convention. However, Bangladesh has reserved the right to take measures following its own laws and practices on the ground that CEDAW provisions may conflict with laws pertaining to different religious communities in the country, especially Sharia law.

In reality, such reservations contradict international commitment to ensure equal treatment of women and the fundamental principles stated in the Bangladesh Constitution, including basic rights of citizens. For example, Article 19(3) says the state will ensure equal opportunities for women in every sphere; Article 28(1) prohibits discrimination on the ground of sex; Article 28(2) ensures equal rights of women in every sphere of the state and public life; and Article 28(4) allows the state to make special provisions in favour of women. The constitution also obliges that any law inconsistent with the fundamental rights shall be void. Despite these provisions incorporated in the constitution, Bangladesh still maintains reservations on Articles 2 and 16.1(c) of CEDAW. Meanwhile, a number of Muslim-majority countries including Türkiye, Yemen,

Jordan, Lebanon, Tunisia and Kuwait have endorsed CEDAW without any reservations. Some countries have also reformed their personal laws to ensure women's rights.

In Bangladesh, the conflict between Sharia law and these reservations is not clearly addressed, leaving room for reinterpretation. For example, while Sharia law dictates that a daughter should receive half the share of inherited property compared to a son, equal distribution of property between them is not explicitly prohibited. Also, Bangladesh is not governed by Sharia law; in the absence of a uniform family code, personal and family issues are governed by different religious provisions, which have an impact on inheritance, marriage and divorce issues.

Women all around the world have been—and still are—subjected to judgement and manipulation as their rights and positions are denied, including economic, social, educational, and other fundamental freedoms.

For example, Muslim marriages are regulated by Sharia law. As a result, Muslim women who face discrimination and/or abuse in marriage struggle to get justice as there is no Sharia court or legal conformity in Bangladesh to enforce their rights. In the case of Hindus, women are

not permitted to get divorced, and outmoded inheritance laws still exist depriving women of their property rights, whereas in India, similar Hindu laws have already been revised.

Misunderstandings regarding religion, stereotypical beliefs, limited education, women's dependence on men, and socioeconomic structures are some of the factors contributing to this issue. It should be the top priority of the government to change such discriminatory practices and encourage open-minded behaviour towards women, without which achieving and sustaining gender equality would not be possible. To eliminate such discrimination, adoption of universal family law is recommended.

It has been observed that in the past, various religious laws have been interpreted and accepted considering the welfare and interest of the people and civilisation. Effective dialogues between the government and religious organisations to achieve consensus on this matter would be essential in this regard. Moreover, Bangladesh may follow the lead of other Muslim-majority countries and, if necessary, collaborate to ratify CEDAW without any reservations, which might boost international relations as well. Upon this consideration, withdrawal of reservations and proper implementation of CEDAW will be effective in providing a congenial atmosphere through appropriate legislative and administrative restructuring. The government can collaborate with NGOs, civil society organisations, and society as a whole to this end.