

Govt must revise its arsenic standard

Its current standard is exposing people to cancer risk

It is unacceptable that the permissible amount of arsenic in drinking water in Bangladesh remains five times that of the global standard, which has been exposing people to the risk of cancer. According to the World Health Organization, the maximum permissible level of arsenic in drinking water is 0.01mg/litre. Bangladesh, however, maintains a standard of 0.05mg/litre—five times that of WHO's standard. This level is not safe for humans to consume, according to experts, especially since arsenic is carcinogenic and chronic exposure to it results in various ailments, including dermatologic issues and different types of cancer.

Since the population relies heavily on groundwater for drinking and cooking, people are being exposed to dangerous amounts of arsenic. In 2012, a bulletin of the WHO said that Bangladesh's arsenic contamination of water was the world's worst mass poisoning. That, in itself, demands serious rethinking by the government and society in general in terms of how perilous the arsenic situation has been in the country and what its long-term repercussions will be. Moreover, at least 43,000 people are estimated to die because of arsenic poisoning every year in Bangladesh, the bulletin read.

Even though the situation has improved since then, arsenic continues to remain a silent yet formidable foe for the country. Something that gives us hope is that, in the last 20 years, the number of tube wells that pump out water with excessive amounts of arsenic has halved. Meanwhile, the latest study conducted by the Department of Public Health Engineering found excessive arsenic in 14 percent tube wells across the country between 2019 and 2022. However, the survey was based on Bangladesh's standards, and experts opine that if the study was done according to the levels set by the WHO, the results would come out to be much worse. According to the Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics and Unicef's cluster survey in 2019, at least 11.8 percent of the population—17.5 million people—are exposed to arsenic even above Bangladesh's national standard of 0.05mg/litre. Such high levels of arsenic can not only affect adults but may also disrupt the normal development of a child's brain and overall health.

Despite the progress made in containing the level of arsenic in Bangladesh's drinking water over the years, impacts of climate change are expected to worsen the problem in the future. Therefore, it is high time the government revised its arsenic standard and took all-out measures to contain the problem of arsenic poisoning to prevent further health issues or, worse, deaths.

Investigate dubious CU recruitments

Allegations of irregularities cannot be ignored

It is deeply concerning that even after repeated allegations and reports of administrative misconduct, particularly regarding recruitment of employees flouting proper procedures, the recently retired vice chancellor of Chittagong University recruited 37 employees on her last day in office without any advertisements or recruitment tests. The University Grants Commission (UGC) had imposed a ban on recruiting staff on an ad-hoc, daily-wage basis, and on a master roll, without prior approval. And these conditions were put in place for good reasons. Despite this, the former CU VC recruited a total of 172 employees during her tenure, violating most of these regulations, according to a report by this daily.

The recruitments made by the former VC are riddled with anomalies. Allegations exist of lobbying for appointments in exchange for money, with a leaked phone call from 2022 citing specific figures: Tk 16 lakh for a teaching position and Tk 12 lakh in exchange of a third class employee position. Most of the recruits are reportedly affiliated with the ruling political party, the Bangladesh Chhatra League, and/or residents of areas near the university. And recently, a faction of CU BCL reportedly attacked a new recruit and threatened the registrar, questioning the presence of new recruits not affiliated with BCL and alleging that their recruitment involved money. This raises questions about the motives behind these rushed recruitments at the last minute without proper assessments or any declared need for additional manpower.

The former VC's tenure has sadly been marred by controversies. Under her administration, CU reportedly became a breeding ground for violence, primarily inflicted by those affiliated with the ruling party. Protests also erupted from both teachers and students against misappropriation of funds and unjustified recruitments.

Given the sheer number of serious allegations of irregularities that have been made against the former CU VC and her administration, the authorities need to conduct a prompt, transparent, and thorough investigation into them. In that regard, it is commendable that the UGC and the university syndicate have voiced commitment to investigate the matter, and we hope that this will be followed through properly.

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

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Persistent traffic menace

It's no surprise that traffic will pick up during Ramadan and the roads will stay gridlocked. However, citizens also see gridlocks on the road for long hours even when it's not Ramadan. I don't know why we are simply adjusting to such scenarios. Recently, Dhaka was appointed as one of the unhappiest places based on the World Happiness Index. How can we be happy when most of our time is continues to be wasted on the road? Our policymakers and city planners must come up with better solutions to make Dhaka traffic more efficient and tolerable, and not accept the current circumstance as the norm.

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GENDER-BIASED SEX SELECTION IN BANGLADESH

Time to implement national guideline



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Gender-biased sex selection (GBSS) refers to the selection of sex of an offspring (often) driven by socio-cultural gender biases, e.g., the value given to sons over daughters. It is a manifestation of son preference and/or daughter aversion. Sex selection can take place at preconception (e.g., sex-selective insemination), pre-implantation (sex-selective embryo transfer), prenatal (sex determination followed by sex-selective abortion) or postnatal stage (infanticide, fatal neglect). The natural sex ratio is 105 males per 100 females, but the skewed sex ratio exceeds 105 and over.

As argued by demography expert Christophe Z. Guilmoto, there are three preconditions of GBSS: fertility decline, son preference, and availability of sex detection technology. Son preference can be understood as "an institution based on a set of values and norms... in a complex interaction between social, economic, political and cultural factors," realising itself through "behaviour that favours boys and disfavors girls." On the other hand, daughter aversion is understood as an "attitudinal aversion (against women and girls) which suppresses women's development and leads to the lower status of women in society." Daughter aversion manifests in the corresponding behaviour of less resource allocation to daughters than to sons. The term is used to emphasise that attitudes, values, and norms of "unwanted" daughters have adverse effects for the girl child. Gradually, when society started to treat girls and women differently, patriarchal and authoritative sociocultural structures reinforcing son preference ultimately created skewed sex ratio at birth (SRB).

GBSS at birth started to take place in the 1980s in some Asian countries such as China, India and the Republic of Korea, in the 1990s in some Caucasus countries such as Azerbaijan, Armenia and Georgia, and more recently, in Montenegro, Albania and Vietnam. Due to GBSS, multifaceted impacts, including demographic and social, have been evidenced. Demographically, 142 million women and girls were missing due to gender-biased sex selection by 2020, 1.5 million girls are missing at birth every year due to prenatal sex selection, and 1.7 million excess deaths among born girl children are recorded every year due to discrimination and

fatal neglect (UNFPA). Regarding social impact, a decision with severe socioeconomic consequences—individual, opportunistic behaviour—leads to collective catastrophe. Growing marginalisation and changing sexual practices of men forced to remain single creates a "marriage squeeze," leading to increase in violence, trafficking, sex work, out-migration for marriage, etc.

In Bangladesh, the three drivers of GBSS are present. Study findings from Dhaka University's population sciences department in 2019 showed that 28 percent of women had a son preference

MR services.

Another driver of GBSS is low fertility: the total fertility rate (TFR) in Bangladesh stands at 2.3, which used to be much higher—6.4 in 1974 and 3.4 in 1993-94. As patriarchy is predominantly in practice, a rise in GBSS cannot be ruled out as fertility rates are also on the decline.

GBSS may not be widely practised in Bangladesh, but evidence from study suggests its existence. In the quantitative sample of the survey conducted by icddr,b encompassing 1982-2018, six percent of mothers had a history of induced abortion. Analysis shows that a mother's history of induced abortion increased the likelihood of the birth of a male child 1.08 times after the introduction of ultrasonography in Matlab, Chandpur. There is substantial geographic variation in sex ratio at birth within Bangladesh, and it is as high as 110 or more in some divisions (UNFPA Bangladesh, 2020). A projection by Chao et al. (2021) suggests

machine or scanner, or any other technology capable of determining the sex of foetus, shall issue, display, publish, distribute, communicate in any manner the availability of facilities to enable prenatal diagnosis or prenatal sex determination.

Second, in the field of infertility treatment, no person or organisation, including infertility clinic, laboratory or centre, including those having technology capable of conducting sex selection on a woman or a man or on both or any cells derived from either or both of them, shall issue, display, publish, distribute, communicate in any manner about facilities of prenatal sex determination or sex selection available.

Third, the concerned ministries of the government shall undertake initiatives to sensitise the relevant stakeholders, including but not limited to, gynaecologists, medical geneticists, paediatricians, registered medical practitioners, community-level health and family planning workers including midwives, community skilled birth attendants (CSVAs), family welfare assistance (FWAs), sub-assistant community medical officers (SACMOs), family welfare visitor (FWVs), radiologists, sonologists, imaging specialists, nurses and technicians about the risk of gender-biased sex selection.

Fourth, the aforementioned stakeholders should be sensitised, among others, on the Code of Professional Conduct, Etiquette and Ethics, provided by Bangladesh Medical and Dental Council, which specifically states that "sex determination for the social, cultural or non-medical reasons should not be performed."

Fifth, any person, organisation, genetic counselling centre, laboratory or clinic, including those having ultrasound machine or imaging machine or scanner or any other technology capable of determining sex of the foetus, must collect and preserve data of the screenings conducted at the respective facilities.

Sixth, any person, organisation, genetic counselling centre, laboratory or clinic, including those having ultrasound machine or imaging machine or scanner or any other technology capable of determining sex of the foetus, must display messages (in digital or printed forms, e.g., posters) on gender equality and valuing girl children.

It is high time that this guideline was implemented at all levels in Bangladesh. In addition, policies need to be formulated addressing the underlying root causes of son preference and undervaluing of daughters, and there needs to be monitoring to avoid unintended effects.



FILE ILLUSTRATION: NAHFIA JAHAN MONNI

for their first child, compared to 24 percent of men. On the other hand, 12 percent of women had a daughter preference for their first child, while 10.4 percent of men preferred to have a daughter for their first child. The study also found that disclosure of the sex of the foetus is quite common in Bangladesh. About 90 percent of women respondents in this study stated availability of USG in the vicinity, 40 percent reported undergoing USG during pregnancy, and 34 percent used it for sex determination. Eighty-four percent of women have ever heard about MR, while 9.1 percent ever used

that Bangladesh has a probability of rising SRB by 77.5 percent, which could result in a cumulative number of up to 1,251,000 missing female births between 2021-2100 (Chao et al., 2021).

It's good to state that, with external support, the government has developed the National Guideline for Prevention of Son Preference and the Risk of Gender-Biased Sex Selection, 2022, where I was a technical committee member. There are six obligations under the guideline. First, no person, organisation, genetic counselling centre, laboratory or genetic clinic or centre, including those having ultrasound machine or imaging

Sustainability must equal financial viability



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What is more important: being a successful, financially viable business, or being a sustainable business? We all want both, and in an ideal world, we would not have to choose between the two. But we live in a world where we all have to pay the bills, a world where there is no safety net for the vast majority of private companies. Over the past couple of years, I have watched many businesses go bust in the fashion and textile industry. In some cases, it has been due to financial mismanagement. In others, the market for their products simply shrunk or disappeared.

In others still, companies struggled to maintain financial viability while adhering to increasingly stringent demands around environmental and social issues. In all cases, such companies are quickly forgotten, and the world moves on. Nobody sees what happens behind the scenes, the sweat and tears, the long days and longer nights spent in attempts to keep things afloat.

I come back to my question: business viability or sustainability? While we would like both, the latter is of no use without the former. I think this is partly the problem our industry faces right

now: there is a disconnect between what needs to be done from a sustainability perspective, and the cold, hard truth about how we pay the bills. For instance, the fashion industry as a whole is setting net zero targets for 2050, which are in line with international scientific consensus such as the Paris Agreement. These are great, and we are all onboard with them. As the saying goes, there is no business on a dead planet.

But what if the financial cost of meeting those goals makes suppliers unviable? I mention suppliers here as it is the suppliers who are being asked to do much of the heavy lifting on these issues. For the majority of fashion brands, most CO2 emissions occur in supply chains. Often, this is more than 90 percent. Thus, what is ostensibly viewed as a fashion industry problem is in many ways a supplier headache.

How do I, as a supplier, reduce CO2 emissions to support my customers in meeting their own targets? I can tell you that it comes at a significant financial outlay. It is also complicated. The power grid in Bangladesh has limited renewable energy output. The introduction of solar power is not cheap either, although it is a worthwhile

investment.

But there are other demands from customers around sustainability. Compliance requests appear to be getting more stringent with each passing year. Factories have to be safer than ever before—and rightly so. More and more requests are made around how our wastewater is treated. Customers are making all manners

Simply put, a more sustainable supplier is a supplier with higher costs. That means better production technologies, a better working environment, the use of better, more sustainable materials, better wages (social sustainability), and investment in renewable energy options.

of new, and different, compliance requests, all falling under the broad umbrella of sustainability. I would say these requests have increased by four- or fivefold over the last 10 years.

One thing has not changed, however. The prices we receive for clothing are not increasing. In real terms, taking inflation into account, they are decreasing.

What this means is we might be more sustainable as suppliers, but we are not necessarily viable as businesses—or we won't be if the industry continues down its current trajectory.