

## The Daily Star

FOUNDER EDITOR: LATE S. M. ALI

### Raising prices can't be our first resort

#### Frequently raising power prices is jeopardising public interests

We are alarmed by the government's decision to follow up its March energy price hike with three more raises this year, especially at a time when inflation is at its highest in more than a decade. After raising energy prices several times last year, the government again increased prices in March. Worryingly still, prices are likely to be increased in four rounds next year as the government plans to withdraw energy subsidies altogether in accordance with the IMF's \$4.7 billion loan condition.

The issue here, as we understand it, is the government's poor revenue collection. As it struggles to increase revenue, it feels it has no other option but to cut back costs. But repeatedly increasing power prices will badly affect businesses, which are already complaining about having to struggle to keep up with foreign competitors amid escalating costs. And since power prices will further decrease people's disposable income, domestic demand will continue to drop, further adding to their woes. This may significantly worsen the economy and negatively impact growth.

Consumers, too, will be hammered by the price hikes. As power prices together with living costs continue to rise, while incomes remain stagnant, people will have no alternative but to further cut expenditures. And while higher power prices will affect all, it will hit the poor much harder. Given that lower income groups have already reduced consumption of even essential food items, how are they supposed to be able to pay higher electricity bills? Did the government take all these factors into consideration when taking such an untimely decision?

To cut back on costs, the government should have renegotiated with the private power plants to reduce its absurd capacity charge payments—which are reportedly taking up 81 percent of the energy subsidies. But instead of doing that, its decision to put the burden on businesses and consumers is totally ridiculous. This just goes to show the lack of transparency and accountability in the sector which has had an abysmal impact on the economy.

If the government wants to do away with subsidies, it should start by removing all capacity charge payments to private power plants first. Its decision to do otherwise shows how policymaking has been captured by special interests. The government must stop surrendering to vested interests and reverse its decision. Power price hike is only acceptable if the government fixes all such issues draining its coffers and bring much-needed transparency and accountability in the sector.

### It's time to turn down the heat

#### Address the factors that are making Dhaka a 'heat island'

It is hardly a surprise that the hottest April in recent history has felt even hotter in Dhaka, thanks to rampant and unplanned urbanisation that has turned a once lush and riverine city into a heat chamber. A recent study has highlighted what Dhaka inhabitants have been experiencing for a while now: a staggering 6°C rise in temperature within the city due to the urban heat island (UHI) effect. As green spaces and wetlands have been ruthlessly occupied in the name of development, our cities have become significantly hotter than surrounding rural areas. Alarming, as much as 75 percent of the city is now covered with asphalt and concrete structures, which trap heat instead of allowing it to dissipate naturally. As a result, Dhaka residents face not only discomfort, but also potential health risks, particularly children, the elderly and low-income communities living in cramped slums or working outdoors.

The climate crisis isn't a distant problem—and it isn't just affecting the coastal belts. The latest heatwave has confirmed that the climate crisis is, indeed, unfolding within our very streets, and it's high time our policymakers understood that the irresponsible way in which our cities are being ravaged will only aggravate the impacts of climate change. While a city should have at least 15 percent green spaces and 10-12 percent wetland, a study conducted by the Bangladesh Institute of Planners (BIP) found that in the last 28 years, green space in Central Dhaka has shrunk to 7.09 percent while wetlands occupy only 2.9 percent of the city. It is simply not sustainable for us to continue down the same reckless trajectory in the days to come.

Bangladesh, which professes to be a climate champion in the global arena, must seriously confront how its narrow vision of growth and development is contributing to the climate crisis locally. Promises of tree planting by city mayors will not bear any real fruit; what we need is a serious reevaluation and reorientation of our current vision. City planners, policymakers and climate change experts need to collectively re-envision what climate-resilient cities look like, and take active steps to reverse the destructive path we are currently treading.

## LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

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### The ills of capitalism

Capitalism, no doubt has a direct link to power. In the name of free trade, it makes us greedy and corrupts our mind. Professor Serajul Islam Chowdhury's article "There is a reason why daily news has become so depressing" about capitalism's link to societal ills is absolutely on the mark. We cannot deny that the anarchy in our campuses or the criminal activities perpetuated by young people today is not derived from greed for power and money. Such hunger makes it easy for people to commit heinous crime without any regrets. We need to hear from people like Serajul Islam sir to open our eyes, even if it is for a short while.

Sonia Khan,  
Arambag

# The fight against child marriage needs a new narrative



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HOSSAIN ZILLUR RAHMAN

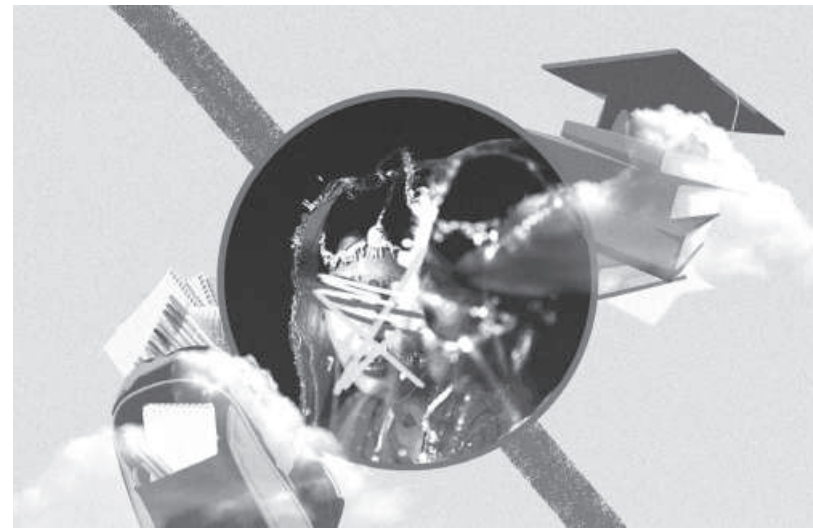
Child marriage prevention advocates within the government as well as society at large are understandably frustrated. Eighteen years as the legal age of marriage is part of the national policy. The Child Marriage Restraint Act was passed in 2017 and the National Plan of Action to End Child Marriage was adopted for 2018-2030. Prevention of child marriage is one of the three zeros of the global population agenda of the International Conference on Population and Development (ICPD). There are plenty of advocacy programmes by the government and NGOs decrying child marriage. Instances where child marriage has been prevented tend to garner media attention. Yet, the societal disquiet on the issue is nowhere near on the decline, because statistics and the grapevine continue to suggest widespread and persistent presence of child marriage across the country.

Indeed, the latest official data—Bangladesh Sample Vital Statistics (SVRS) 2023 of BBS—paints an alarming picture of 41.6 percent of girls married under 18 and 8.2 percent married under the lower age of 15. In 2020, the respective figures were 31.3 percent and 4.9 percent. Bangladesh Demographic and Health Survey (BDHS) 2022 reiterates such findings. Not only are the rates high, but the trend is in the opposite of the desired direction. Adding to the concern, child marriage is also fuelling associated problems of adolescent pregnancy, gender-based violence, school dropout, and legal minefields.

Are we not trying enough? Or are we failing to understand the evolving ground realities where the legal and social, formal and informal, intentions and outcomes are clashing in hugely unintended, unforeseen and unexpected directions? Recent grassroots consultations of the Power and Participation Research Centre (PPRC) in Gaibandha, Cox's Bazar, Nilphamari and Rangpur have been eye-opening, pointing to factors rarely

surfacing in policy discourses at the centre.

Take registration of child marriage, for one. In terms of official formalities, there is a nod to the official age of 18



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in that marriage registrars—Qazis—tend to decline to register underage marriage officially. Instead, a vast pseudo-reality has opened up with various less-than-legal registration procedures: notary marriage, bhua (fake or clandestine) registration, registration in a different location with false age declaration, etc. The couple or their families are often told that the marriage will be officially recorded after the girl has reached the age of 18, by which time she may already be a mother, divorced or abandoned. Many Qazis, particularly in rural or mofussil areas also plead their economic insolvency compelling them to engage in such practices.

Whatever it may be, the girl in such a circumstance faces two immediate vulnerabilities. One, she is often thrown out of school because prevailing school norms frown upon a married student in primary/secondary classes. Second, if the husband becomes unhappy for

whatever reasons including unmet dowry demands and throws her out, she has little opportunity to legal recourse because the marriage was not "officially" registered. Indeed, two participating judges in the PPRC Cox's Bazar dialogue vented their frustration at the surreal judicial landscape they are confronted with in such cases. On the ground, both policy and advocacy appear blinded to address such complexities, preferring instead to carry on with "feel good" narrow prioritisations of legal penalties and textbookish awareness campaigns.

The prolonged school closure during the Covid pandemic significantly

change factor that is yet to come on the radar of national-level policy and advocacy discourses, and donor discourses too. The views of grassroots stakeholders at the PPRC's 2023 regional consultations pointed to the agency of the adolescents themselves—both boys and girls—aided by digital technology to be as big a driver of child marriage as broader societal norms. A female school principal in Gaibandha explained how widespread "bunking"—absence from classes during school hours—has become. Adolescents appear to have taken to such surplus "free time" with gusto, one consequence of which is proliferation of "internet romances." This in itself is not a concern, but certainly becomes one when such technology-aided social interactions prematurely land in child marriages.

A few weeks ago, in an event marking International Women's Day where I was giving a keynote presentation, the state minister for women's and children's affairs essentially reiterated this concern from her own experiences of dealing with such issues in Kapasia, her constituency, with both brides and grooms being underage. Arguably, there is also a deeper crisis of education here with prevailing over-bureaucratized and top-down dispensing of education failing to hold the adolescents' interest.

The rising trend of child marriage in 2024—six years from the SDG end-line of 2030—is a wake-up call if ever there was one. Such high rates also underlie the stolen youth of our girls, rising counts of gender-based violence and perpetuation of inter-generational poverty through the unacceptably high rates of adolescent pregnancy. The false narrative comfort of legal penalties and textbook advocacy needs to be transcended with an urgent narrative reframing on child marriage with closer eyes and ears to the ground. There are specific knowledge gaps to be overcome with new research. Radical policy prescriptions, such as making secondary education compulsory, need to be introduced in the policy discussions. Honest soul-searching has to be undertaken on how to reorient education from its current over-bureaucratized, over-commercialised and unequal dispensing to become the quality driver of national aspirations it should be. Above all, we have to ensure the quality future that our girls and boys deserve.

worsened the above trends. Research on the impact of policies adopted to respond to the pandemic have only scratched the surface. Two issues that did get some attention, also in the PPRC BIGD Covid impact research, are learning loss and mental health. But the grassroots consultations conducted by the PPRC in 2023 hinted at deeper impacts in terms of what I call awareness loss, particularly on issues such as girls' rights, value of education, and civic engagement. Such awareness loss has been exacerbated by the prevailing political environment at the grassroots, which appears to fuel lack of accountability and a culture of impunity as well as turning a blind eye to the spread of toxic masculinity. There is little wonder that parental concern with security of their girl children is arguably becoming as big a factor as patriarchal norms in driving high rates of child marriage. There has also been another major

## EU supply chain law is both a threat and an opportunity

RMG NOTES

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MOSTAFIZ UDDIN

Recently, the European Parliament approved the Corporate Sustainability Due Diligence Directive (CSDDD), moving it one step closer to formal adoption by the European Union. The CSDDD, once adopted, will create a legal liability for companies in relation to environmental and human rights violations within their global supply chains.

There has been a huge discussion about the CSDDD in Western media, with concerns raised that it has been significantly watered down from the initial proposal. But what is this directive/legislation, and how will it impact Bangladesh's garment manufacturers?

The CSDDD actually represents a significant regulatory initiative by the EU to promote sustainable business practices across various industries, including the garment sector. At its core, it mandates that large companies operating within the EU take active steps to identify, prevent, mitigate, and account for the adverse impacts of their operations on human rights and the environment. It is built on the principle that businesses should be proactive in their sustainability efforts, rather than reactive or merely compliant with existing norms.

The regulation covers a number of areas. In terms of due diligence requirements, it means that companies are required to conduct due diligence processes to assess and address the

risks associated with their business operations and their entire supply chain. It also means looking into how their products are made, where materials are sourced, and the working conditions in factories, among other factors. All have obvious implications for manufacturers, particularly with regard to the rights of garment workers, which are a contentious issue throughout Asia.

Transparency is also a crucial aspect of the CSDDD. The new regulations mandate that companies must regularly report on their due diligence activities, findings, and the measures they take to mitigate negative impacts. The reporting ensures that stakeholders, including consumers and investors, are well-informed about the company's sustainability practices. The key here is that, to ensure greater transparency, fashion brands will have to further engage with suppliers. Will this mean more audits and questionnaires for manufacturers? This seems to be a distinct possibility.

Stakeholder engagement is another key aspect of the CSDDD. Engaging with potentially affected groups and other stakeholders is essential under the new rules. This includes dialogue with local communities, workers, and NGOs to gain insights into the real-world impacts of business operations. If a company identifies that it has caused or contributed to adverse impacts, it must provide or cooperate

in remediation. This could involve compensating communities for environmental damage or improving working conditions in factories. Previously, the issue of remediation had been left for the supply chains to sort out. To this extent, it will be interesting how the issue of remediation plays out under the CSDDD.

In Bangladesh, the garment industry is already heavily scrutinised for its environmental and social impacts, ranging from excessive water usage and pollution to labour rights abuses in the supply chains. Given that, I assume the CSDDD could significantly impact garment manufacturers in several ways.

**Garment manufacturers might face higher operational costs as they invest in better supply chain management systems, conduct audits, and potentially pay higher prices for sustainably sourced materials.**

The first of these is supply chain scrutiny. Manufacturers will need to have a thorough understanding of their entire supply chain—from raw material sourcing to the final product. This includes ensuring that all parts of the supply chain adhere to environmental standards and respect workers' rights. For instance, manufacturers might need to switch to suppliers who use sustainable materials or enforce fair labour practices.

The potential for increased costs is another issue. Implementing comprehensive due diligence processes can be costly. Garment manufacturers might face higher operational costs as they invest in better supply chain

management systems, conduct audits, and potentially pay higher prices for sustainably sourced materials. These costs could also affect pricing strategies and profit margins.

On the other hand, adhering to the CSDDD could provide a competitive advantage for some suppliers. Consumers are increasingly conscious of the environmental and social impacts of their purchases. Companies that demonstrate genuine commitment to sustainability may attract more customers and build stronger brand loyalty. This could be an opportunity for some suppliers, and we are already seeing this as brands put more effort into supporting progressive, responsible garment manufacturers.

The directive may also spur innovation in the industry. Manufacturers might invest in new technologies and processes that reduce environmental impacts, such as water recycling systems or energy-efficient production techniques. This can not only help comply with the CSDDD but also improve overall efficiency and cost-effectiveness.

Moving forward, for garment manufacturers in Bangladesh, compliance with the CSDDD is going to be essential for accessing the European market—our largest market alongside the US. Non-compliance can result in legal risks, including fines and restrictions on market access. Therefore, it's crucial for the manufacturers to align their practices with the directive to avoid such risks. We cannot afford to get this wrong.

While the transition may be challenging and costly, the long-term benefits of building a sustainable operation could outweigh these initial investments—not just in profitability, but also in contributing positively to society and the environment.