

Reclaim footpaths from extortionists

Footpaths choked with hawkers causing nuisance for pedestrians

It's no secret that the teeming thoroughfares of Dhaka also teem with hawkers, a combination that has long been a source of pain for pedestrians. According to a recent report by this daily, illegal occupation of footpaths by hawkers has turned these public spaces into hotbeds of extortion, with local political leaders, police, and even hawkers' associations collecting fees in the name of "renting" them. Our reporters' account of the money changing hands through this system is quite telling.

For example, on the footpath adjacent to the General Post Office (GPO) in Dhaka, a hawker has to pay Tk 150 daily. It rises to Tk 250 during peak sales periods like Ramadan and Puja. A one-time payment of Tk 1.5 lakh is apparently needed to secure a spot big enough for a stool and a table, while "permanent" ownership would cost between Tk 8-10 lakh, depending on how close it is to the GPO gate. At Motijheel's Shapla Chattar area, hawkers have to pay Tk 100-300 daily, depending on the size of their space, with the rate rising to Tk 400 during festivals. Vendors operating between Elephant Road and New Market areas have to pay Tk 10,000-20,000 twice a year, plus daily fees of Tk 150-300. Similar arrangements likely exist in other major hubs for hawkers including Gulistan, Paltan, Farmgate, Kamalapur Railway Station, Fulbaria, etc.

What this shows us is that there is a very organised, politically-controlled system governing footpath occupation that has proved to be impossible to dismantle, despite occasional eviction drives by the city corporations. According to an estimate, there are around 5 lakh hawkers in Dhaka. Their existence has created a unique urban challenge in which we have to balance pedestrian rights with the rights of hawkers to a livelihood. We cannot deny that hawkers play an important role in our economy by providing affordable goods to citizens. So, while it is undeniable that their vulnerability has fuelled a corrupt ecosystem that benefits a select few at the expense of the many—with pedestrians often forced onto busy roads, risking their lives—we must find a balanced approach that benefits both groups.

Firstly, we need to strictly enforce existing regulations against illegal street occupations. City authorities and law enforcement must work in tandem to ensure that footpaths are kept clear for pedestrian use. But evicting hawkers without any rehabilitation plan is neither fair nor sustainable. The authorities, therefore, must pursue a comprehensive course of action. That may include designating special times and places for hawkers, providing them with legitimate spaces to conduct their businesses without disrupting pedestrian flow. Issuing ID cards and collecting nominal fees can also help formalise their operations, ensuring that they contribute to the city's revenue rather than paying extortion money to corrupt elements.

Protect children from online abuse

Concerted efforts needed to stop such exploitation

There is no denying that many children in Bangladesh face violence and exploitation at home or outside. But how many of us are aware that they can be equally unsafe in online platforms as well? In 2023, the US-based non-profit National Center for Missing & Exploited Children (NCMEC)'s CyberTipline received more than two million reports related to the upload of child sexual abuse material from Bangladesh alone. This is quite staggering and alarming.

Such materials often end up on the internet when children and parents, unaware of the risk of posting personal data online, share images and videos without proper security measures. Referring to global data by the Internet Watch Foundation, a Prothom Alo report said that 92 percent of the 275,652 websites containing child sexual imagery found by the organisation last year contained self-generated imagery. Of that, 55 percent were created by children aged 7 to 10 years.

In Bangladesh, internet and social media literacy among parents is often low, so they may remain in the dark about who their children are interacting with online and what material they are posting. Online predators can fish for children's profiles, collect personal data, and use it to entice, stalk, harass, blackmail and exploit them. Because of the social culture of victim blaming, children may not even share the ordeals they face online with an adult. Parents, on the other hand, may not report such abuse because of the existing barriers in our legal system. Therefore, a concerted effort by the government, parents, NGOs, law enforcement agencies, and educational institutions is needed to protect children from sexual exploitation.

The government, with the help of grassroots non-profits, must conduct campaigns to raise awareness about such abuse. Information about online risks and safe internet use should be properly included in the curriculum. We also need to encourage children's participation in off-line activities for which more parks and playgrounds are a must. Moreover, parents' involvement in children's social and online life should be increased. Legal loopholes enabling online predators and paedophiles must also be removed, so that people feel comfortable about reporting threats against children and using the existing helplines to their full capacity. Finally, we must denounce sexual objectification of children in visual media and reality shows so that children are not influenced by it.

THIS DAY IN HISTORY



First prisoners at Auschwitz

During World War II, on this day in 1940, the first transport of Polish political prisoners arrived at Auschwitz, which became Nazi Germany's largest concentration, extermination, and slave labour camp, where more than one million people died.

What does poverty research in Bangladesh require?



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Research on poverty in Bangladesh requires answers to four fundamental questions: i) what are the poverty trends in the country?; do the official figures present a true picture?; ii) how do different shocks (economic and non-economic) affect poverty and vulnerability?; iii) what are the structural factors behind poverty?; and iv) what are the important aspects of addressing poverty in a sustainable way?

According to the Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics (BBS), the headcount poverty rate (as per the cost of basic needs method) in the country declined from 80 percent in the early 1970s to 18.7 percent in 2022. Between 2016 and 2022, the national poverty rate declined from 24.2 percent to 18.7 percent. Both the rural and urban areas experienced a drop in poverty rates. While the official statistics paint an optimistic picture of poverty reduction, alternative surveys suggest a more nuanced reality. According to two rounds of surveys conducted by SANEM in 2018 and 2023, which tracked the same 10,000 households nationwide, the decline in national poverty rate has been slower than reported, while urban poverty has risen. The Multidimensional Poverty Index (MPI), which measures various deprivations at the household level in health, education and living standards, corroborates this trend. The surveys also highlight a worrying trend of increasing inequality, while food security, a critical component of poverty, has worsened too.

The persistent vulnerability among a large section of the country's population remains a pressing concern despite high economic growth, rise in per capita income, export and remittance performances, and microfinance initiatives. Vulnerable households are those who are categorised as non-poor but may fall into poverty due to any economic or natural shocks. SANEM's surveys indicate that the pandemic caused

a sudden spike in poverty rates, reversing some of the progress made before. Climate change poses another significant threat to development. My recent research suggests that if there is inaction in addressing climate change, a rise in temperature by two degrees



VISUAL: SHAIKH SULTANA JAHAN BADHON

Celsius by 2040 could increase the headcount poverty rate in Bangladesh by 3.5 percentage points. The ongoing inflationary pressure adds woe to the vulnerabilities. The coping strategies to different shocks, available to poor and vulnerable households, remain limited and repeated shocks make these households exhaust those limited options.

In-depth poverty research in Bangladesh requires understanding the structural factors behind poverty. The ownership structure plays a critical role, as unequal distribution of assets can lead to wealth concentration in the hands of a few. The labour market is another determinant; limited access to well-paying jobs and the prevalence of low-wage work perpetuate a cycle of poverty. Gender disparities further compound poverty, particularly for women who often face barriers to equal rights in property, receiving equal

females remains low due to cultural norms and structural barriers. Workers face poor working environments, low wages, and little to no social security. Occupational rigidities, such as difficulty in transitioning between jobs or sectors, further exacerbate the situation. Lack of opportunities for productive and diversified employment means that workers are often stuck in low-value, labour-intensive jobs with little chance for advancement or skill development. This situation can be called the "low pay, low productivity, and low compliance" cycle.

Bangladesh's economic, social and institutional paradigms shape the pathways to poverty reduction. The economic paradigm is related to the pattern of structural transformation of the economy. Despite notable progress over the past five decades, the lack of economic and export diversification

undermines the prospects of reduction in poverty and vulnerability in a sustainable manner. The policy regime, related to the pattern of structural transformation, has remained narrowly focused towards supporting a few sectors. There is a need for productive economic and export diversification supported by a broad-based policy regime.

The social paradigm refers to the pattern of social development. Over the past five decades, there have been some notable improvements in health and education. Success in health and education came with finding some low-cost solutions to addressing child and maternal mortality, and a rise in school enrolment. However, with the evolving demographic structure of the population and growing demand for high-skilled labour, the current and future outlooks remain bleak. Low public spending on health and education and inefficiencies in these sectors act as barriers to reaping the benefit of demographic dividends.

The institutional paradigm refers to the quality of institutions and the political economy of development. In Bangladesh, weak formal institutions, in the form of weak state capacity, weak regulatory regime, prevalence of corruption, crony capitalism and dominance of informal institutions, seriously undermine the scope for enhancing the capabilities of poor and vulnerable people. For example, the weak state capacity in mobilising tax revenue limits the state's capacity to spend high on health, education, and social protection. At the same time, high reliance on indirect taxes leads to a regressive tax system that affects poor people.

We can highlight three important aspects for sustainably addressing poverty in Bangladesh. First, there should be a meaningful solution to the ownership issue. The economic, social, and institutional paradigms for poverty alleviation have to ensure that both material ownership and the feeling of ownership among poor and vulnerable people are enhanced. Second, economic and social capabilities of poor and vulnerable households have to be enhanced through economic diversification, labour market reform, and investment in health and education. And third, the state has to effectively redistribute resources from rich to poor through taxes and social expenditures.

PROJECT ■ SYNDICATE

Europe must fight the far-right surge



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Far-right populist parties performed exceptionally well in the European Parliament elections, finishing first in France, Italy, and three other countries. They won nearly a quarter of the seats in parliament, just behind the centre right.

With Europe already reeling from the war in Ukraine, the threat of a second Donald Trump presidency in the United States, stagnant living standards, strained welfare systems, and extreme weather events, nationalists pose a severe threat. These parties are often sympathetic to Russian President Vladimir Putin and downright hostile to green policies, migrants, and European Union institutions.

Mainstream pro-European parties have three broad options for responding: complacency, co-optation, or counterattack. Let's start with the case for business as usual. Many Europeans believe—incorrectly—that EU elections are inconsequential. Turnout is much lower than in national elections, and many people cast protest votes, often against governing parties.

Even so, pro-EU parties will still command a majority in the next parliament. The centre-right European People's Party (EPP), led by European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen, actually gained seats.

Moreover, far-right parties are deeply divided. They are split between two rival parliamentary groups, and some are unattached. They disagree on the Ukraine war, economic policy,

LGBTQ rights, and, crucially, whether to work within the EU system or against it. Inevitably, such rifts dilute their influence.

But complacency is dangerous. The centre held only because it is defined ever more broadly, encompassing not only the EPP and the Socialists and Democrats (S&D), but also the classical and social liberals of Renew Europe and the Greens. Von der Leyen seemingly has enough votes in parliament to be re-elected as commission president—but only just. And anything can happen in a secret ballot. This hardly suggests a strong and stable pro-EU centre, especially because the EPP gained ground partly by campaigning against the bloc's green agenda.

More worryingly, the elections reordered the political landscape in key member states. Despite neo-Nazi tendencies and questionable ties to Russia and China, the extremist Alternative für Deutschland (AfD) finished second in Germany, ahead of Chancellor Olaf Scholz's Social Democrats (SPD). In France, National Rally won 32 percent of the vote, more than double that of President Emmanuel Macron's centrist allies—a crushing defeat that led Macron to call a snap election. Europe's two most powerful leaders are thus severely weakened, leaving the bloc potentially rudderless in the face of immense economic, security, and climate challenges.

The second option, then, is to accommodate the far right, a common

outcome at the national level. Many centre-right parties adopt the far right's language and policies, notably on migration (as do some centre-left ones). In several member states, they even govern together.

At the EU level, pragmatists argue that some far-right parties can be brought into the conservative mainstream. The risk is that the far

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right co-opts the centre right, rather than vice versa. Consider how the EU's approach to asylum-seekers has shifted from then German Chancellor Angela Merkel's welcoming policy in 2015 to near-universal hostility now. Moreover, far-right parties can gain strength as their views become normalised, as evidenced by the victory of Geert Wilders' Party for Freedom (PVV) in last year's Dutch general election.

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That leaves the third option: fight the far right. Macron has opted to pursue this course by calling a snap legislative election. This is widely viewed as a high-stakes gamble, given Macron's unpopularity and

the electorate's hostile mood. France could conceivably elect a far-right prime minister in a run-off vote next month. In that case, Macron would become a lame duck for his remaining three years in office.

But his position was severely weakened in any case, and his governing coalition, which lacks a parliamentary majority, was at risk of losing a no-confidence vote. By dissolving the National Assembly, Macron has regained the initiative, creating two possible paths for defeating the far right.

For one, the campaign may focus on voters' attention on the far-right threat, which could help Macron cobble together a parliamentary majority comprising left and right parties united in their desire to keep the National Rally at bay. Given Macron's unpopularity, this seems somewhat unlikely.

More plausibly, Macron could set up the far right to fail. Populists tend to perform best when they are outsiders challenging established parties, not wielding responsibility. Observe how Conservatives in the United Kingdom, having delivered on their Brexit promise, have been skewered by the reality of it, while the popularity of Wilders' PVV has already dipped now that it is in government.

If the National Rally wins a majority, or ends up leading a broader right-wing coalition, it would likely struggle with the harsh responsibilities of governing—such as difficult fiscal decisions—and whether and how to cooperate with EU institutions. Moderating its headline policies could erode its anti-establishment edge; enacting them could plunge the country into crisis. Either way, this could undermine the popularity of its leader, Marine Le Pen, ahead of her likely presidential run. Better a far-right prime minister in 2024 than a far-right president in 2027.