COVID-19 drastically impacts Bangladesh students and youth

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A recent webinar in Bangladesh points to the escalating social crisis facing students and youth throughout the country. The online event, held in late October by the Citizen's Platform for SDGs (Sustainable Development Goals set by the UN) included the results of a survey entitled "COVID-19 and Bangladesh: A Youth Agenda for Recovery."

More than two-thirds of survey respondents were from rural areas with the remainder from Dhaka and other cities. Over 89 percent of young people employed in Bangladesh work in the informal sector.

The survey, which was conducted between October 18 and 27, involved just over 1,160 people between the ages of 18 and 30 years. It revealed that 28 percent of those participating had abandoned their studies to support their families amid the COVID-19 pandemic. Students, like other poor sections of the society, have been ignored by the Awami League government.

The Citizen's Platform for SDGs consists of 104 organisations from across the country involved in the 2015 United Nations' "call to action to end poverty and protect the planet." The platform's supposed objective is to assist in the development and implementation of sustainable development goals.

The survey found that almost 80 percent of respondents had experienced income reductions during the pandemic. Although many youth had abandoned their studies in order to find work, a substantial number had not found jobs. Some 33 percent said they were still "looking for jobs" with 9 percent of graduate students reporting that they "faced difficulties" securing employment.

According to the International Labour Organisation, a total of 94.4 percent of Bangladesh's workforce is aged between 18 and 35 years, with over 4 million employed in the country's 4,500 officially registered garment plants.

Another study by the South Asian Network on Economic Modelling (SANEM)—a Bangladesh research organisation—found that about 8 percent of garment workers were unemployed in September, up from 5 percent in August. It reported that employers had responded to the pandemic by cutting jobs and intensifying the exploitation of its low-paid workforce.

In April, when plants were running at lower capacity, the median monthly working hours for women and men was around 43 and 42 hours respectively. In June, July, and September, however, work hours began to return to 2019 rates of 246 hours per month. Most garment workers rely on overtime, which often accounts for 20 percent of their monthly income, to meet basic living expenses.

One garment factory owner, who supplies European and North American retailers, told *bdnews24.com*: "Now the second wave has started. We don't know what the future holds for us." He added that he had cut one in five jobs at his plant.

The World Bank reported last month that the average wage of salaried and daily workers dropped by 37 percent compared to usual earnings immediately prior to COVID-19.

Another aspect of the pandemic's social impact has been rising rates of depression and mental stress, particularly amongst the young. According to the platform's survey almost two-thirds of respondents said they were depressed about future income prospects and 96 percent reported mental stress.

Indifferent to these disastrous figures, the government of Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina continues to implement the social spending cuts dictated by the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund.

According to "The Protection We Want: Social

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Outlook for Asia and the Pacific," which is jointly produced by the UN Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific and the ILO, Bangladesh currently spends only a tiny fraction of its gross domestic product (GDP) on welfare programs.

Published on October 15, the report noted that Bangladesh allocates only 0.7 percent of its GDP for "social protection," lagging behind Sri Lanka's 5.2 percent, India's 3.2 percent, and Pakistan's 1.9 percent. The European Union's statistical office defines social protection as welfare benefits, or transfers in cash or in kind, to households and individuals.

Addressing the 14th international conference of the Finance Ministers of Asia-Europe on November 6, Prime Minister Hasina boasted that her government had so far announced "21 stimulus packages equivalent to $US14.14 billion for various sectors, as well as support to different segments of the society."

The hypocrisy of Hasina's claims is exposed by last month's Citizen's Platform for SDGs survey, which reported that almost 80 percent respondents stated that they "did not get any support from the government."

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