Strong Tobacco Control Measures a Must to Protect the Youth

Dewan Tasadduk Raza, Sunanganj :: The young generation has always been the prime target of the tobacco industry. As one generation of tobacco users passes away or quits due to illness and health hazards involved, the tobacco industry must assemble a new batch of ‘loyal’ customers from the youth to keep its business ‘afloat’ and the profit coming.

Once entrapped by the allure of the advertisement and hooked on deadly addiction, the youth become sure business for the companies until these ‘loyal’ customers make their way to the grave, only to be replaced by a new batch of consumers.

In Bangladesh alone, tobacco claims 161,000 lives each year. Despite being the root cause of such numbers of casualties and illness, the tobacco industry often evades accountability and runs business unscathed.

Against this harrowing backdrop, experts suggest the government strengthen the existing tobacco control law, adopt effective tax and price measures, and implement Article 5.3 of the World Health Organization Framework Convention on Tobacco Control (WHO FCTC).

Such recommendations came today (28 May) during a virtual press conference, held jointly by PROGGA (Knowledge for Progress) and ATMA (Anti-Tobacco Media Alliance), on the occasion of upcoming World No Tobacco Day 2025, scheduled to be celebrated on 31 May 2025. The theme of this year’s World No Tobacco Day is “ Tamak Companir Kutokoushal Unmachan Kori, Tamak O Nicotine Mukto Bangladesh Gori .”

It was informed during the virtual roundtable that the youth has become the primary target of tobacco industry’s aggressive advertisement and promotional campaign. According to a 2016 study conducted by John Hopkins Bloomberg School of Public Health, 487 retailers among the 507 retailers placed within 100 meters radius of schools in Dhaka displayed tobacco products beside candy, chocolates and soft drinks. To get children and adolescents hooked on nicotine products, the tobacco industry resorts to a wide range of ill tactics. E-cigarettes and vape products are now often being marketed in flavors, such as bubblegum, cherry and chocolates, thus making it harder for school-goers to distinguish tobacco products from usual snacks. WHO has identified at least 16,000 flavors being used in vape products to allure potential customers. Moreover, e-cigarettes and vaporizers are also manufactured and sold in the shape of USB sticks, pens and candy, thus making it easier for the addicted youth to evade parental supervision.

During the event, speakers raised demand that the government ensure speedy finalization of the ongoing amendment of Smoking and Tobacco Products Usage (Control) (Amendment) Act, 2013 while at the same time, keeping the process free from tobacco industry interference. Discussants also raised demand to merge the low and medium tiers of cigarettes and thus reduce the number of cigarette price tiers from existing 04 to 03 in the upcoming national budget for FY 2025-26. The other proposals raised during the event include: divesting government shares from tobacco companies, removing cigarettes from the list of essential products, and banning advertisement, promotion and marketing of tobacco and nicotine products on social media outlets.

Nadira Kiron, Co-convener of ATMA hosted the event whereas Hasan Shahriar, Head of Programs, PROGGA presented the key points. Speakers at the event include Dr. Liakat Ali, member of Health Sector Reform Commission; Professor Dr. Golam Mohiuddin Faruque, president of Bangladesh Cancer Society; Professor Dr. Anupam Hossain, Public health expert and international sports development consultant; Md. Mostafizur Rahman, former Chairman of BCIC; Md. Ruhul Quddus, former coordinator of National Tobacco Control Cell (NTCC); Saifuddin Ahmed, Executive Director of WBB Trust; Shaheen Akter Dolly, Executive Director of Nari Maitree; Professor Rumana Haque, Department of Economics at the University of Dhaka; AKM Maksud, Executive Director of Grambangla Unnayan Committee; Helal Ahmed, General Secretary of Prattyasha; Shagufta Sultana, Project Director of Aid Foundation; Mortuza Haider Liton, Convenor of ATMA; Mizan Chowdhury, Co-Convenor of ATMA; and AMB Zubair, Executive Director, PROGGA.