

# The Daily Star

FOUNDER EDITOR: LATE S. M. ALI

## What if a school falls to fire hazards next?

### Alarming number of educational institutions at risk

In a city where at least 2,603 buildings have been flagged as potential tinderboxes awaiting ignition, it is understandable that some of them would belong to educational institutions among other establishments. Yet, the revelation that the number of "risky" buildings frequented by students would be as high as 720 really hits you in the face. The fire service, according to a report, revealed this staggering figure last year after inspecting 801 buildings housing schools, colleges and universities for five years. Moreover, it found 64 other buildings to be "highly risky", and only 16 to have satisfactory fire safety measures in place. In other words, the vast majority of educational buildings in Dhaka are at risk of fire.

Overall, during the five-year period, the fire service inspected 1,527 schools, colleges, and universities across the country, and found 1,072 to be "risky" and 336 "highly risky". The criteria used for risk designation include number of staircases available, number of fire extinguishers, staircase width, availability of fire hydrants, water reservoir capacity, etc. Any modern building would not be complete without these basic requirements fulfilled, yet these seem to be a big ask from our building owners. The flurry of drives that have followed since the Bailey Road tragedy on February 29—with the DMP alone reportedly detaining 872 owners and employees from 1,347 risky hotels, restaurants, gas cylinder shops, and chemical warehouses till Tuesday—have once again highlighted the precarious state of fire safety in most buildings in the capital.

The risk for schools and colleges is particularly grave given their high occupancy rates. The devastation that a major fire will likely cause is unthinkable. Visits by our correspondents to some of the buildings marked by the fire service brought to the fore eerie similarities with the Bailey Road mall, with single, narrow staircases, and no fire extinguishers, emergency exits, or fire buckets. Clearly, it's no longer about whether students in those buildings will be at risk, but when, unless retrofitting or re-construction measures are urgently undertaken.

We can no longer afford to ignore these concerns, not when the safety of our children in the very institutions where they are supposed to be protected is compromised. As we have said before, while we appreciate the ongoing safety drives conducted by police, Rajuk and city corporations, what will really serve us in the long term is systemic change pre-empting the very construction/operation of unsafe buildings. For educational institutions, it also means following up on the fire service's findings, and taking drastic action to ensure the safety of our students.

## The glass ceiling must break

### Challenge the persistent biases against women in the workplace

As we celebrate the International Women's Day today, we must do so with the sombre realisation that, despite the visible advancements of women over the past decades, there is still a long way to go before equality becomes a lived reality for women rather than an abstract ideal. Women still face significant structural barriers in accessing and exercising their rights guaranteed by the constitution, as well as constantly confronting entrenched patriarchal values as they navigate their personal and professional lives.

According to a recent report by the World Bank, titled "Women, Business and Law 2024," women in Bangladesh enjoy only one-third of the legal rights enjoyed by men in the workplace. The report—which scores nations based on 10 indicators, including mobility, workplace, pay, marriage, parenthood, entrepreneurship, assets, pension, safety, and childcare—places Bangladesh, with a score of 49.4, at the bottom among South Asian countries, with only Afghanistan behind. The report also highlights a significant pay gap between men and women, with Bangladesh scoring only 25 out of 100 on that indicator. The statistics, though sobering in their gravity, are not altogether shocking, given the horde of issues holding women back including lack of familial support, workplace biases, inadequate childcare and maternity benefits, sexual harassment, and so on.

Despite women and girls outnumbering and outperforming men in education, our workplaces, for the most part, remain male dominated. Take the banking sector, for example, where only 16 percent of women are employed. Deep-rooted and unacknowledged prejudices of employers and managers towards female recruits when it comes to work distribution, promotions or other benefits are all too common, no matter the sector. In addition to institutional biases, women also have to disproportionately bear the brunt of childcare and domestic work compared to their partners, leaving them juggling—and at times failing to balance—their familial and professional duties, in the absence of proper childcare facilities at their workplaces. The ubiquity of sexual violence, be it in the family, workplace or public sphere, remains another major obstacle to women's true emancipation.

This year's Women's Day theme, "Invest in women," should not be taken lightly. Our workplaces must become more gender-sensitive if we are to bridge these stark inequalities, beginning with ensuring proper and well-staffed childcare facilities, redress for sexual harassment in the workplace, and maternity leave and benefits. We must guarantee more women in leadership positions. If we are to truly progress as a nation, we cannot do so by leaving behind half of our population to fight the uphill battle against patriarchy and institutional sexism on their own.

New Message

To: \_\_\_\_\_  
Subject: \_\_\_\_\_

Facing issues in your area? Want your opinions about events around you to be published in *The Daily Star*? Send us a short letter with your name and city!

Write to us: [letters@thedailystar.net](mailto:letters@thedailystar.net)

# Neglecting women's participation in politics perpetuates their oppression



Lucky Akter is central committee member in Communist Party of Bangladesh.

LUCKY AKTER

March 8, 1857 witnessed the uprising of female needle factory workers in New York City, who marched in defiance of perilous working conditions, meagre pay, and gruelling 12-hour shifts. This demonstration resonated across the Atlantic, reaching Europe with its message of solidarity. Building upon the momentum of the 1857 movement, by 1860, female needle factory workers succeeded in securing the legal authorisation to establish a union. Fast forward to March 8, 1908, when thousands of women employed in the garment and textile sectors of New York City renewed the call for equitable pay and a standard eight-hour workday by mobilising on the streets once more.

In 1909, following the precedent set by their predecessors, 30,000 US women workers initiated a 13-week strike advocating for similar demands. The following year, in 1910, the First International Conference of Socialist Women convened in Copenhagen, Denmark. During the second assembly of this conference, Clara Zetkin, a prominent figure in the German Social Democratic Party, presented a proposal. She suggested the establishment of an annual gathering specifically for working women, providing them with a platform to convene and share perspectives on a designated day each year.

Clara Zetkin's proposal led to the adoption of March 8 as Women's Day. However, it wasn't until 1974, 117 years later, that the United Nations officially recognised March 8 as International Women's Day. Today, we commemorate the protest of women workers in New York City on March 8, 1857 as International Women's Day.

A review of the history reveals that International Women's Day has its roots in significant political struggles. Yet, in contemporary times, the focus has shifted away from this core theme. Instead, the discourse surrounding Women's Day struggles has been overshadowed by corporate advertising and the influence of neoliberal economic principles, endorsed by the state, which have downplayed the historical significance of women's struggles. Moreover, discussions on women's political empowerment are conspicuously absent from public discourse. We must bring this issue to the forefront, both internationally and within Bangladesh, to foster meaningful dialogue and action towards women's political empowerment.

Although women have held prominent positions in Bangladesh politics for a considerable period, when discussions arise about women's



VISUAL: JOHANNA KARMOKAR JUJ

empowerment, it's common for some to point out that women occupy key roles such as that of the speaker of the national parliament, top leadership positions within the ruling party, the current loyal opposition party, and the former opposition party. This assertion often leads to a sense of satisfaction regarding the state of women's empowerment among many people.

The question is: what is the position of women in the current politics of Bangladesh? In 2008, the Election Commission (EC) introduced changes to the law to promote greater female participation in politics. Specifically, amendments were made to the Representation of the People Order (RPO) stipulating that political parties must ensure a minimum of 33 percent women's participation at all levels of committee by 2020. This initiative reflects a commitment to fostering gender diversity and inclusivity within the realm of

Bangladeshi politics. However, it appears that no political party—rightist, leftist, or otherwise—in Bangladesh has met this requirement, despite the mandate being established 16 years ago. Even within the central committee of the Communist Party of Bangladesh, the current rate of women's participation stands at 27.91 percent, indicating a shortfall.

opportunities for women in all spheres of society.

In Bangladesh, women face unequal access to essential resources such as land, credit systems, agricultural inputs, and markets. Even though a majority of women in the country are actively involved in agriculture, their contributions often go unnoticed and unrecognised by the state, society, and even within their own families. The practice of reducing women's contributions to mere "housework" has become commonplace. Unfortunately, the GDP fails to account for the value of domestic work or women's labour in agriculture. Furthermore, our laws, policies, and social norms do not adequately support women's property ownership rights. Achieving political empowerment for women and ensuring their equal participation in policymaking are crucial steps towards addressing these glaring gaps.

It's undeniable that true emancipation for women isn't achieved by politically disempowering them, depriving them of their rights, or simply portraying idealised images of them on product packaging. Neglecting women's participation in politics only perpetuates their oppression. Despite women holding significant roles in government, violence against women persists. Regardless of their location—be it within the family, workplace, or nation—women continue to face patriarchal aggression, highlighting the ongoing need for systemic change.

Advancing the fight for women's emancipation will undoubtedly encounter obstacles. Within the realm of politics, reactionary forces like Hefazat-e-Islam may push for measures such as the imposition of 13 points of custody, the annulment of women's policies, or resistance against the implementation of 33 percent representation of women in political party committees. Under the state's patronage, women often remain portrayed as subordinate. This is evident through the prevalence of derogatory remarks towards women, whether uttered in religious sermons or circulated online, reflecting a broader societal trend of disrespect towards women.

To alter this entrenched paradigm, the issue of women's liberation must be firmly placed on the state's agenda. It's crucial to recognise that even with women holding positions of power within the state, patriarchy still influences its character. Transforming the patriarchal mindset of the state necessitates sustained political activism. Therefore, empowering women economically and politically, while establishing non-discriminatory structures, is imperative for effecting change. The global struggle for women's rights symbolises a battlefield, and on this International Women's Day, we extend our gratitude to all those engaged in the fight for women's emancipation.

## Invest in women to accelerate progress

Gwyn Lewis is UN resident coordinator. Gitanjali Singh is UN Women country representative. Kristine Blokhuis is UNFPA country representative.

GWYN LEWIS, GITANJALI SINGH, AND KRISTINE BLOKHUIS

At the current rate of progress, it will take another 300 years to reach full gender equality. It is estimated that, globally, an additional \$360 billion is needed annually to achieve SDG 5 on gender equality and women's empowerment. And in the meantime, women's rights are increasingly coming under threat or being rolled back. That is why the theme for this year's International Women's Day—"Invest in Women: Accelerate Progress"—is so important.

Successful investments in women have already been made in Bangladesh. The number of women in the labour force increased to close to 43 percent in 2022, up from 36 percent five years before. Women are better educated despite the many challenges. Girls are more likely than ever to go to school, and women are more likely than ever before to survive childbirth, thanks to large-scale investments in education, healthcare, and efforts to end child marriage.

Unfortunately however, large gaps remain in ensuring the meaningful representation of women. Women own

less than 1.7 percent of enterprises in the formal sector, and only seven percent of all the agricultural land in Bangladesh. The Sustainable Development Goals cannot be achieved without the leadership of women in the social, economic, and political realms. The barriers to progress, including discriminatory social norms and unequal power relations, need to

**Policies are needed that will improve women's socioeconomic status. Equal inheritance rights and women-only spaces in markets for example will allow women to actively participate in the workforce, invest in their family land, and care for their families.**

be addressed.

We have seen the impact of this inequality firsthand on recent field visits to Rangpur, Khulna, and Barishal. In our many conversations with women often at the bottom of the social and economic ladder, they clearly expressed their dreams and aspirations. They want access to decent jobs where they are protected from discrimination and harassment. They want education for their daughters, and opportunities equal to those of their sons.

So, what does investment in women really look like?

Public and private investments need to be geared towards women's empowerment. Realising women's rights is not only a moral imperative, but also a smart economic investment. When women earn an income and control their earnings, their children are more likely to attend school, their families are healthier, their self-worth improves, and their household incomes grow—along with the economy.

Strengthening the social care infrastructure in Bangladesh will reduce unpaid care work by women and create decent work opportunities. Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina has prioritised an initiative to introduce daycare facilities across Bangladesh, and this is another important step to allow women's continued representation in the workforce, and ultimately to allow women to take on more leadership roles.

Policies are needed that will improve women's socioeconomic status. Equal inheritance rights and women-only spaces in markets for example will allow women to actively participate in the workforce, invest in their family land, and care for their families. Efforts already underway in Bangladesh to amend the law on domestic violence and to introduce a law on sexual harassment are extremely encouraging.

The government, civil society, and local leaders need to come together to step up action on gender equality. Ensuring women are considered when