

## INTERNATIONAL DAY FOR THE ELIMINATION OF VIOLENCE AGAINST WOMEN

## Empathy is missing for survivors seeking justice



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Today marks the International Day for the Elimination of Violence against Women, as well as the commencement of the 16 Days of Activism against Gender-Based Violence (GBV), which is an annual campaign to raise awareness on this issue around the world. It is an opportunity to reflect on the legislative and procedural challenges faced by survivors of sexual violence in Bangladesh. But it substantially fails to address the human elements involved. Survivors navigate a justice system riddled with structural barriers, trauma, and inadequate empathetic support. In a recent conversation with this author, Barrister Sara Hossain emphasised that the focus must shift from performative gestures to actionable reforms. Awareness campaigns, while valuable, cannot substitute for systemic change, which remains essential for addressing the root issues with GBV.

Bangladesh has enacted several laws to combat gender-based violence. But the gap between legal provisions and their implementation reflects deep-rooted institutional weaknesses and resource constraints. This is further crippled by societal stigma attached with crimes of sexual violence. The Domestic Violence (Prevention and Protection) Act, 2010, a landmark step focusing on preventing physical, emotional, sexual and financial abuse within the household, provides for protection orders, compensation and shelter for survivors. However, according to Rumana Hoque, member of the Bangladesh National Women Lawyers' Association (BNWLA), not having financial independence is a major factor that prevents survivors from pursuing justice. Many of them are forced to rely on their natal families, who may themselves face financial limitations or social ostracisation in providing long-term support. This economic vulnerability frequently compels survivors to compromise their safety, return to abusive households, or risk homelessness. For many survivors of domestic violence, the immediate goal is not accountability for the perpetrator, but simply the cessation of violence and assurance of safety. This reflects the painful reality that pursuing legal action is a luxury many cannot afford due to the financial resources and emotional resilience required to sustain such efforts.

Access to shelters is another significant barrier. Statistically, Bangladesh has only around 36 shelters nationwide, of which 15 are NGO-operated. This number is grossly inadequate for a population that includes



VISUAL: SALMAN SAKIB SHAHRYAR

eight crore women. Moreover, the majority of shelters, being concentrated in urban areas, are inaccessible to women from rural communities. Admission processes are often complicated and cumbersome, requiring police referrals or court orders for entry into state-run facilities. This bureaucratic hurdle is particularly challenging for domestic violence survivors who may not have immediate access to law enforcement or legal personnel. As a result, many survivors are left without viable options for safety and support.

Sara Hossain states that the absence of victim and witness protection mechanisms aggravates the issues. In 2006, the Law Commission of Bangladesh submitted a report on a proposed law relating to the protection of victims and witnesses of crimes involving grave offences. In 2015, a High Court Division bench passed a directive for the enactment of a witness protection law. Then in August 2017, with the joint effort of the UNDP and the Supreme Court of Bangladesh, the Witness Management Policy for Subordinate Courts and Tribunals was drafted. Despite all these steps, no witness

decades. This legislation would ensure the safety and dignity of survivors and witnesses during legal proceedings, addressing the widespread issue of intimidation and reprisals by perpetrators. Interestingly, while the International Crimes Tribunal (ICT) rules include provisions for victim and witness protection, such safeguards are not extended to regular criminal cases, including those involving GBV. This omission leaves survivors vulnerable and undermines their confidence in the justice system.

Gaps in investigative procedures also compound the plight of survivors as they frequently encounter law enforcement officers and medical professionals who lack training in trauma-informed practices. Survivors are traumatised again during investigations, particularly in cases of sexual violence. Since 2012, the government's Multi-Sectoral Programme on Violence Against Women introduced One-Stop Crisis Centres (OCCs) and forensic DNA facilities, although they are insufficient in number and capacity. With only 13 OCCs available for eight crore women, survivors in rural and remote areas

face significant challenges in accessing these critical services. Even in districts where OCCs exist, outreach efforts remain limited, leaving many survivors isolated and unsupported. These centres offer critical services including medical care, counselling and legal aid, but their number and capacity remain severely deficient. Even in districts where such centres exist, outreach efforts are insufficient.

In the past decade, judicial precedents

corruption, which continue to undermine the enforcement of these directives.

Unfortunately, these directives and activism become rhetorical exercises that fail to address the real, practical needs of survivors. The justice system itself remains alienating and hostile to survivors. The physical environments within courts and police stations further deter survivors from seeking justice. In many places, the women and children repression prevention tribunals lack basic amenities such as clean restrooms, waiting areas or spaces for children. This creates an unwelcome atmosphere that adds to the emotional toll that survivors already endure. Improving these spaces to make them more welcoming and accessible is a simple yet critical step towards ensuring easier navigation within the court houses. Basic interventions, such as improving signage, could significantly improve the survivors' experiences within the justice system.

Bangladesh can draw lessons from countries like South Africa, UK and the Philippines, which have successfully incorporated intermediaries such as paralegals and community workers to support GBV survivors and ease their access to justice. In South Africa, community advice offices serve as vital resources, particularly in rural areas, where paralegals provide survivors with legal advice, emotional support, and assistance in navigating the justice system. These intermediaries act as a bridge between survivors and formal institutions, ensuring that survivors are treated with empathy and care. Similarly, in the Philippines, Barangay VAW (violence against women) desks at the community level provide immediate assistance to survivors, including counselling, referrals and legal aid. These desks are staffed by trained officers who offer empathetic and survivor-centred support, fostering trust and encouraging survivors to seek justice without fear of alienation or insensitivity. These models highlight the importance of accessible and empathetic support systems in addressing GBV effectively. Steps may be taken to enshrine such initiatives within the Bangladeshi legal system.

The 16 Days of Activism serves as a reminder of the urgent need to address the systemic challenges faced by survivors of gender-based violence. These campaigns must focus on actionable reforms. Expanding the number and capacity of OCCs, implementing trauma-informed training for law enforcement, and enacting the long-delayed Victim and Witness Protection Act are crucial steps towards creating a survivor-centric justice system. By addressing these structural barriers, Bangladesh can move closer to a future where survivors are empowered to seek justice, rebuild their lives, and live free from violence and fear. Collective integration of legislative and empathetic reforms are the fundamental roadblocks to achieving this vision. It requires sustained commitment—the cost of inaction is far too great to ignore.

## The nation still failing its women



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collective anxiety that looms over us, a fear that no amount of caution or self-defence can fully dispel. It is terrifying to live with this awareness—that as a woman, our very existence makes us a potential target, and that for every violent act reported, countless others remain hidden in silence.

It is not only the frequency of these crimes that shocks me, but the brutality with which they are committed. There is a pervasive culture of impunity that enables this violence, a culture where perpetrators know that they are likely to escape punishment and where the lives of women are treated as expendable. The interim government has done little to address this crisis. We were promised security and progress, but when it comes to women's safety, the silence has been deafening. GBV is not simply an issue of law and order; it is a fundamental human rights crisis. Every day that goes by without reform and justice, is a day when women in Bangladesh are abandoned by their country and left to fend for themselves in a hostile environment.

Despite the occasional outrage, the cycle of violence continues. An incident occurs, it sparks public outcry, demands for justice are made, and then the attention fades until the next horror emerges. This repetitive cycle has desensitised us as a society, and the overall inaction only reinforces the sense that women's lives are not a priority. Yet the suffering is not something we can ignore. The daily fear, the emotional scars, and the sense of betrayal from a system that fails to protect us—these are the burdens we carry, day in and day out.

Today, it feels important to address not just the violence itself, but the systemic failures that allow it to thrive. Violence against women in Bangladesh is not a

shadow over societies around the world, and here in Bangladesh, it feels like an existential tragedy. The International Day for the Elimination of Violence against Women is meant to bring awareness and drive change, yet every year it arrives as a painful reminder of the progress that remains elusive. There has been a surge in gender-based violence (GBV) cases, each story cutting deeper than the last, a stark reminder that violence against women in Bangladesh is more than a "social issue." It is a national crisis.

Just recently, the body of a woman was found mutilated, in a murder committed by her husband. Cases of women being sexually harassed and assaulted are also on the rise. These incidents are as horrific as they are tragic, but they are only the latest additions to a long history of unchecked violence against women. Globally, violence against women is a horrifyingly common experience, with nearly one in three women—around 736 million individuals—facing physical or sexual violence at some point in their lives. In Bangladesh, at least 50 percent of women report having experienced physical or sexual violence from men in their lives.

The Human Rights Support Society's (HRSS) monthly human rights analysis report revealed that in October 2024 alone, 117 women were victims of violence in Bangladesh. Among them,

eight were subjected to gang rape, while seven were killed after being raped. Shockingly, 55 women and girls were victims of rape, with half of them under 18. The report also highlighted 11 cases of sexual harassment, and two murders related to dowry disputes. These figures expose the alarming frequency and severity of GBV

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in Bangladesh, yet the nation's response remains lukewarm, as we have now grown numb to these incidents.

As a woman in Bangladesh, these incidents are more than just numbers. Each case feels like a painful reminder of how vulnerable we all are. There is a

series of isolated incidents; it is an epidemic rooted in the very fabric of our society. A culture that devalues women, normalises misogyny, and ignores our voices has left us vulnerable and without recourse. The systemic response, or lack thereof, only exacerbates this crisis.

The judicial process is fraught with delays, corruption, and bias, often favouring the perpetrators instead of the victims.

Until we see true accountability, until there is real reform, and until this country prioritises the protection and dignity of its women, we are destined

to repeat this cycle of violence. The failure to address this epidemic is more than a government oversight—it is a glaring, heartbreaking stain on our collective conscience. We are the ones who need to solve this. We owe it to ourselves, to each other, and to the generations that will follow.

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## e-Tender Notice

This is to notify all concern that the following tender is invited in the national e-GP portal.

| SL No | Tender ID No. | Name of Work   | Publishing, Closing date & time      | Tender Document last selling Date & Time | Tender Opening Date & Time |
|-------|---------------|--|--------------------------------------|--|----------------------------|
| 1     | 1040697       | Procurement of Dietary Articles of Package-1 for the period of 01 January/2025 to 30 June/2025.  | 24-Nov-2024 12:00, 10-Dec-2024 12:00 | 10-Dec-2024 11:00                        | 10-Dec-2024 12:00          |
| 2     | 1040698       | Procurement of Dietary Articles of Package-2 for the period of 01 January/2025 to 30 June/2025.  | 24-Nov-2024 12:00, 10-Dec-2024 12:05 | 10-Dec-2024 11:00                        | 10-Dec-2024 12:05          |
| 3     | 1040699       | Procurement of Dietary Articles of Package-5 for the period of 01 January/2025 to 30 June/2025.  | 24-Nov-2024 12:00, 10-Dec-2024 12:10 | 10-Dec-2024 11:00                        | 10-Dec-2024 12:10          |
| 4     | 1040700       | Procurement of Dietary Articles of Package-6 for the period of 01 January/2025 to 30 June/2025.  | 24-Nov-2024 12:00, 10-Dec-2024 12:15 | 10-Dec-2024 11:00                        | 10-Dec-2024 12:15          |
| 5     | 1040701       | Procurement of Dietary Articles of Package-7 for the period of 01 January/2025 to 30 June/2025.  | 24-Nov-2024 12:00, 10-Dec-2024 12:20 | 10-Dec-2024 11:00                        | 10-Dec-2024 12:20          |
| 6     | 1040702       | Procurement of Dietary Articles of Package-8 for the period of 01 January/2025 to 30 June/2025.  | 24-Nov-2024 12:00, 10-Dec-2024 12:25 | 10-Dec-2024 11:00                        | 10-Dec-2024 12:25          |
| 7     | 1040703       | Procurement of Dietary Articles of Package-9 for the period of 01 January/2025 to 30 June/2025.  | 24-Nov-2024 12:00, 10-Dec-2024 12:25 | 10-Dec-2024 11:00                        | 10-Dec-2024 12:25          |
| 8     | 1040704       | Procurement of Dietary Articles of Package-10 for the period of 01 January/2025 to 30 June/2025. | 24-Nov-2024 12:00, 10-Dec-2024 12:30 | 10-Dec-2024 11:00                        | 10-Dec-2024 12:30          |
| 9     | 1040705       | Procurement of Dietary Articles of Package-11 for the period of 01 January/2025 to 30 June/2025. | 24-Nov-2024 12:00, 10-Dec-2024 12:35 | 10-Dec-2024 11:00                        | 10-Dec-2024 12:35          |
| 10    | 1040706       | Procurement of Dietary Articles of Package-12 for the period of 01 January/2025 to 30 June/2025. | 24-Nov-2024 12:00, 10-Dec-2024 12:40 | 10-Dec-2024 11:00                        | 10-Dec-2024 12:40          |
| 11    | 1040707       | Procurement of Dietary Articles of Package-13 for the period of 01 January/2025 to 30 June/2025. | 24-Nov-2024 12:00, 10-Dec-2024 12:45 | 10-Dec-2024 11:00                        | 10-Dec-2024 12:45          |

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