

# The many faces of gender-based violence and herd mentality



**BLOWIN' IN THE WIND**

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Social media acted as an incubator for the July uprising. And the heat for that incubator came through human energy: it was not just “manpower,” it had an equal share of “girl power.” On July 14, female students from Dhaka University’s Rokeya Hall were the first to break the hall gate, protesting against the “Razakar” branding of student protesters by the now-fallen prime minister. The heavily guarded male halls prevented the boys from being there first. Two images have stuck in our mind from the early days of the uprising: the attack on a girl with a machete by a helmet-clad Chhatra League goon in front of Rokeya Hall, and the defiant march of two residents of the hall, one wearing Western clothes and the other wearing hijab. The extraordinary courage shown by the female students can be best summed up by the image of a young girl with a backpack trying to stop a police van with her arrested friend from leaving the High Court area.

This is the generation that is no stranger to protest. We have seen their overwhelming presence during the Road Safety Movement (2018) and Rage against Rape (2020). Tactically, protesters often place women at the forefront of protest marches, hoping law enforcement agencies would show some leniency. But the kind of brutality with which police attacked the women protesters last year was unprecedented, adding fuel to the public outrage that led to the fall of the previous government. The transition to an anti-discriminatory government stirred some hope of attaining gender parity. But that optimism was marred when only male student representatives were included in the interim government.

The announcement of the Bangla Academy Prize without a female nominee continued the trend. After criticism, the award declaration was postponed. But when the vetted awardees hit the stage, we noticed that there was no change in the gender portfolio. What’s even more alarming is the social unrest that has



Women’s participation in all major movements in the country, including the July uprising in 2024, has been on par with their male counterparts.

FILE PHOTO: ANISUR RAHMAN

accompanied the political transition. Certain groups, led to believe they can act with impunity, exhibit a peculiar herd mentality. With the focus of law enforcement and the judiciary diverted in dealing with demands, sabotage, and external threats, there is a systemic rise in the abuse and violence of marginal groups, including women. Women, especially those who are vocal or visible, have become soft targets of public scorn.

Our women footballers, for instance, received threats of murder and rape, prompting Bangladesh Mahila Parishad to register a protest. The tears of our booters

who brought two SAFF Championship titles for the nation—which earned the team this year’s Ekushey Padak—contradict the spirit of the anti-discriminatory movement. In an emotional press conference, the players revealed the mental torture inflicted by their English coach that had drained them out. Instead of garnering sympathy, these women were bullied on social media by a mob who don’t want to see women perform in the

in Bengal has come under serious scrutiny for her alleged involvement in “leading the women astray.” Earlier, a group blackened one of Begum Rokeya’s sculptures because they found it a distraction from their prayers. We have seen celebrities being boycotted or stopped from attending ceremonies. This is a regress from the powerful role played by women in the ouster of the previous regime. It exemplifies the patriarchal orientation of

collective aggression that we are seeing are products of a social machine that demands unquestioning conformity. They strive to establish a homogenous and inclusive group. The exclusion of women, by extension of indigenous entities, from the calculus is no accident.

Herd mentality is supported by a molar structure that suppresses diversity and enforces uniformity. The pervasive victim-blaming or slut-shaming that we have seen recently is symptomatic of such a structure. Its insidious nature became evident when social media erupted with the search for an 11-year-old girl who had reportedly gone missing in Dhaka recently. Police found her in Naogaon, and we were told that she eloped with a young man aged 19 or 22 years, who was following her on social media. This could very well be a case of grooming by a paedophile. The adolescent girl wanted to escape the trauma of her ailing mother, who came to Dhaka from Barishal for cancer treatment. Once the truth came out, the girl became the target of online bullying and shaming. The potential groomer of sexual exploitation received little or no attention. This is one of many such cases that highlight our society’s tendency to shame victims rather than hold perpetrators accountable.

Around the same time, the body of a 13-year-old girl was discovered in Hatirjheel Lake 17 days after she had gone missing. Police nabbed two suspects who confessed to gang rape, murder, and dumping the body.

Police data shows a sharp rise in gender-based violence. With all the talk of reforms, it’s crucial to implement policy adjustments, such as awareness campaigns, to halt the manipulation of the desire machine that perpetuates patriarchy and other societal phenomena. We need legal reforms, societal education, empowerment of women, support for feminist movements, and international collaboration.

Let me end on a positive note. We can draw inspiration from a recent story involving a 14-year-old from Rajshahi. Faced with the prospect of child marriage at the age of 13, she fled her home and sought refuge at her school. The teachers of Rajshahi Alor Pathshala halted the marriage and funded her education. She finished her school with the dream of becoming a teacher one day. This is the Bangladesh that we desire, a country where girls can bloom without being marginalised, humiliated, raped and murdered. After all, they were at the forefront of the fight that brought changes to the system.

## Building resilience: Asia’s sustainable development imperative



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Asia has long been heralded as a beacon of progress in poverty reduction, lifting 1.5 billion people out of extreme poverty within just two generations. Yet, this remarkable achievement cannot mask the region’s remaining challenges. About 692 million people remained trapped in extreme poverty in 2024, living on less than \$2.15 a day. Projections suggest that 266 million more could fall into poverty by 2040. Climate change compounds these vulnerabilities, leaving communities in Asia, the world’s most disaster-prone region, grappling with recurring crises.

In the face of these challenges, sustainable infrastructure, climate action, and resilient health systems emerge as pillars of hope. These interconnected priorities are not merely aspirational—they are essential for securing the region’s hard-earned progress and ensuring a future where no one is left behind. And I have witnessed how transformative projects across Asia and the Pacific bring the promise of sustainable development to life.

From typhoons to floods, Asia’s exposure to climate-related disasters is unparalleled. In 2023 alone, the region endured the highest number of weather, climate, and water-related hazards globally, according to the World Meteorological Organization. The impacts of these disasters are devastating, both in human and economic terms. Bangladesh, ranked seventh on the Global Climate Risk Index 2021, exemplifies the stakes. In the country, Cyclone Remal and recurrent floods have left over 18 million people affected, with six million in urgent need of assistance. Coastal erosion, rising sea levels, and intensifying cyclones further threaten the livelihoods of millions.

In Bangladesh’s southwest Satkhira district, the European Union-funded, UNOPS-managed Lives in Dignity Grant Facility has supported vulnerable communities affected by climate displacement. Between 2022 and 2024, two partners, Uttaran and Educo, worked alongside communities and authorities to strengthen resilience, improve access to sanitation, water and income opportunities, and enhance disaster preparedness, management and

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adaptation for some 7,000 people. By acting as a catalyst for collaboration and enabling communities to lead adaptation efforts, this initiative highlights how these integrated, locally driven solutions can help vulnerable populations rebuild and thrive.

Sustainable development cannot succeed without robust health systems. The Covid pandemic underscored the importance of accessible, resilient health infrastructure. Yet, many countries in Asia still face significant gaps in healthcare delivery, exacerbated by climate-related disruptions. Investing in health infrastructure—from hospitals to clean water systems—is essential not only for improving public health but also for enhancing communities’

ability to withstand shocks.

At UNOPS, we take pride in supporting initiatives that align infrastructure investments with the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), driving sustainable progress and lasting impact. For example, we have worked with the Bangladesh government and the Global Fund to procure and install 29 oxygen plants across district and rural (upazila) hospitals. This project, valued at over \$16 million, strengthens Bangladesh’s healthcare infrastructure with a sustainable, local supply of medical oxygen, reducing the country’s reliance on external suppliers. These oxygen plants provide oxygen at a fraction of the cost—17 to 22 times lower than cylinder-based supplies—enabling tens of thousands of patients to receive life-saving oxygen therapy every day and benefitting over 8.2 million people annually. This

initiative also enhances emergency preparedness, ensuring hospitals are ready for surges during public health crises or natural disasters. Such projects show us that true development is not just about growth, but about building the strength to endure, ensuring every community is prepared for the challenges of tomorrow.

Another critical challenge for sustainable development in Asia is plastic pollution. The Plastic Free Rivers and Seas for South Asia (PLEASE) project, funded by the World Bank and implemented by the South Asia Cooperative Environment Programme (SACEP) with UNOPS support, exemplifies how regional collaboration can drive impactful solutions. Covering all eight South

Asian nations, including Bangladesh, this initiative fosters circular economy innovations to reduce plastic waste entering our oceans. UNOPS contributions—from project management and procurement to infrastructure support—have been instrumental in promoting knowledge-sharing, building partnerships, and advancing best practices in plastic waste management.

In addition to supporting grant investments for circular solutions, UNOPS facilitated the construction of SACEP’s green headquarters, incorporating sustainable design principles that reflect the project’s environmental ethos. By addressing the root causes of plastic pollution and equipping communities with the tools to adopt sustainable practices, the PLEASE project aligns with broader global efforts to protect our ecosystems and combat climate change.

Bangladesh’s vulnerabilities to climate change and its commitment to sustainable development hold valuable lessons for the broader region. The Lives in Dignity Grant Facility’s innovative approaches, such as climate-smart agriculture and livelihood diversification, demonstrate the importance of tailoring solutions to local contexts. Community ownership, continuous capacity-building, and integrated strategies that address immediate needs while fostering long-term resilience are critical to success.

Similarly, regional initiatives like the PLEASE project highlight the importance of collaboration and innovation in addressing shared challenges. By leveraging partnerships with public, private, and civil society actors, we can maximise impact and drive sustainable solutions at scale.

Asia’s path to a sustainable future hinges on bold climate action, resilient infrastructure, and stronger health systems. For countries like Bangladesh, investing in these areas is critical to protecting progress and unlocking new opportunities. By combining global expertise with local innovation, we can drive real impact, creating a future where communities don’t just adapt, but thrive.

## CROSSWORD BY THOMAS JOSEPH

ACROSS

- 1 Looks forward to
- 7 Labyrinth
- 11 Malay island
- 12 Weary sigh
- 13 Face a difficulty
- 15 Casts a ballot
- 16 Prayer ender
- 18 Turn to slush
- 21 Recipe instruction
- 22 Singer Harry
- 24 Old calamity
- 25 Halloween cry
- 26 Director Spike
- 27 Tickled
- 29 Ore source
- 30 Rigging support
- 31 Wagers
- 32 Fancy parties
- 34 Begin fighting
- 40 Heaps
- 41 “Search me”
- 42 Like lawns in the morning
- 43 Swift

DOWN

- 1 Jackson 5 hit

2 Court

- 3 Sleeve filler
- 4 Indignant cry
- 5 Wyoming’s - Range
- 6 Chimney grime
- 7 Squishy and wet
- 8 Boxing great
- 9 Ray-gun sound
- 10 Snaky shape
- 14 Influence
- 16 Molecule’s makeup
- 17 Confusion
- 19 Dole out
- 20 Hoe targets
- 21 Massage setting
- 22 Lawn material
- 23 Notice
- 25 Floppy top
- 28 Protection from harm
- 29 Caron of “Gigi”
- 31 Jazz style
- 33 Heaps
- 34 Scoundrel
- 35 Bullfight cry
- 36 Do a yard job
- 37 Exalted work
- 38 Tie the knot
- 39 Utter



## FEBRUARY 1’S ANSWERS

O	B	A	M	A	S	E	C	T	S
P	A	P	A	S	I	G	L	O	O
T	R	E	Y	S	G	O	A	T	S
			F	E	R	N	M	O	O
T	O	O	L	S	H	E	D		
U	N	D	O		O	R	A	T	E
S	T	O	W	S		S	Y	R	I
K	O	R	E	A	N		F	U	N
			R	O	O	T	L	E	S
V	A	T		T	R	I	O		
A	L	I	T	O		A	W	A	R
S	T	E	A	M		R	E	C	U
T	O	R	R	E		A	R	E	N