

The uneven scale of reproductive responsibility



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In a society where access to basic menstrual health products is still a contentious issue, the recent controversy surrounding the shutdown of booths selling sanitary napkins at Amar Ekushey Boi Mela—following “complaints from religious groups”—highlights a deep-rooted stigma around menstruation in Bangladesh. Despite progress in gender rights, menstrual hygiene remains a hushed topic in the country, often confined to whispers within households. It would be quite rational to say that the recent incident is not isolated, but is part of a larger pattern perpetuating human rights concerns for women and girls across the country.

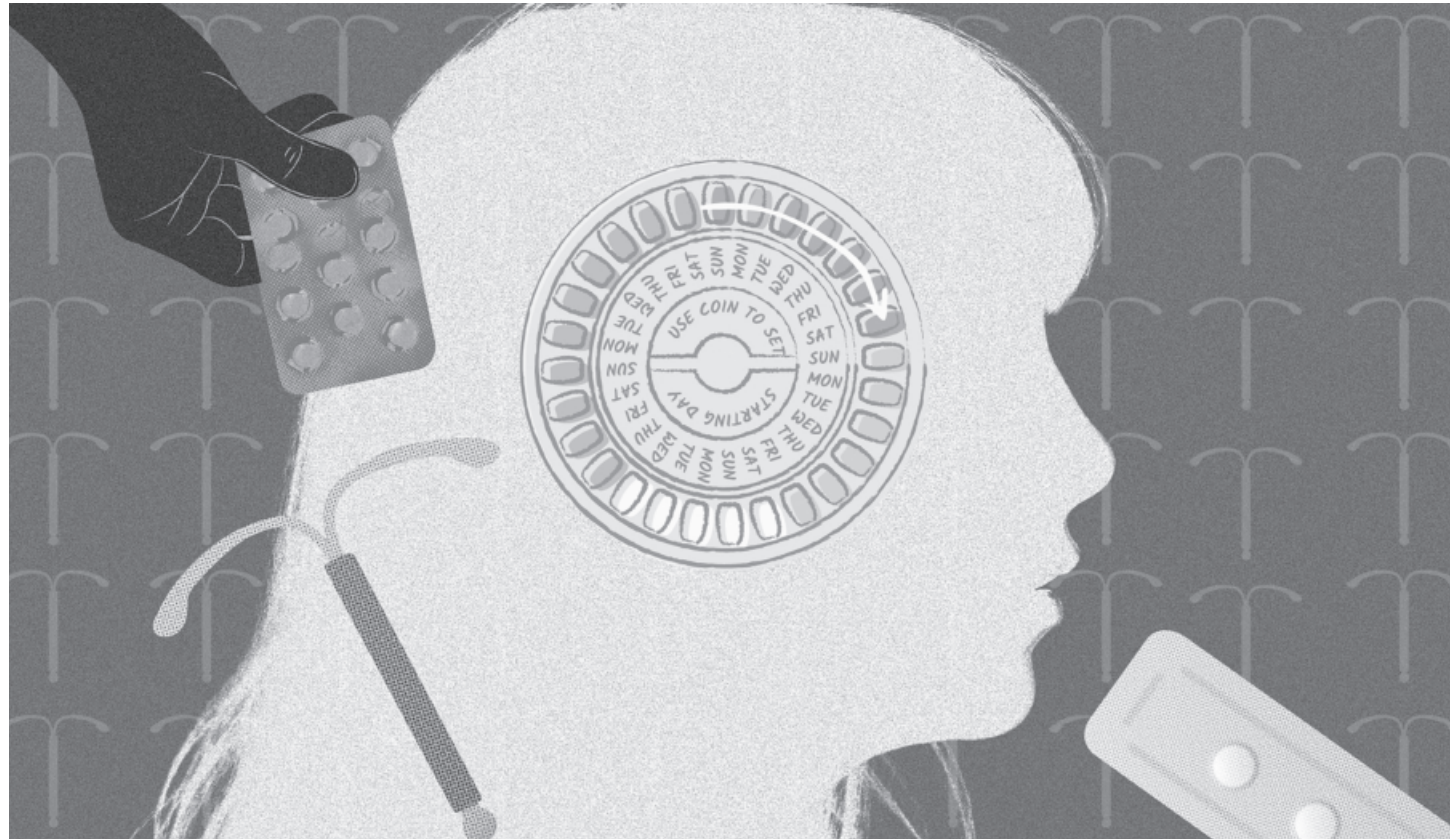
This stigma extends beyond cultural taboos, intertwining with economic disparities and gender-based discrimination. The silence around menstruation reinforces an uneven scale of reproductive responsibility, where women are expected to manage their periods discreetly while bearing the responsibility of family planning, along with the weight of societal judgement.

When Aasha (not real name) told her husband she was considering his sterilisation, his response crystallised a reality faced by millions of women across Bangladesh. “I don’t want to end the option of having a child again, it could have adverse health effects too,” he said, effectively placing the entire burden of contraception on his wife’s shoulders.

Aasha was devastated. The couple had decided beforehand that they didn’t want any more children and had been using modern methods to avoid pregnancy. But it was not a foolproof method; condoms for example, have a relatively high failure rate—about 14-15 percent. And when she conceived—twice—she took over the counter abortion pills the first time. The second time, she had to undergo a clinical procedure for abortion performed in legally dubious circumstances.

“I had heavy bleeding, my head would spin, I had blackouts, and I was listless and tired all the time. So, I told him that sterilisation would be better than taking these blighted pills or using condoms,” the 27-year-old, a mother of two, told this writer over the phone from her home on the outskirts of Pirojpur district, in the southwestern region of Bangladesh.

Aasha’s story is not unique. It reflects a broader pattern in the country where,



VISUAL: ANWAR SOHEL

While women have access to a wide array of contraceptive options, men’s options have remained unchanged since the 1960s.

despite six decades of scientific advancement in contraception, women continue to bear disproportionate responsibility for family planning.

A recent review of 10 years of Bangladesh Sample Vital Statistics from 2014 to 2023, conducted by the Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics (BBS), reveals that the use of birth control methods decreased in 2023, the lowest since 2015, and stands at 62.1 percent. The 2023 report only provides the results; it does not clarify why and where the use of contraception has fallen. Moreover, it also reveals a troubling scenario: while modern contraceptive use among women has fallen to what it was eight years ago, the gender disparity in contraceptive responsibility remains stark.

The numbers tell a clear story. In 2023, oral contraceptive pills remained the most common choice, used by 35.5 percent of

women, followed by injectable methods at 14 percent. Meanwhile, male participation in contraception was minimal: condom use accounted for just 6.9 percent of all contraception methods, and male sterilisation represented a mere 0.2 percent. This imbalance reflects not just a medical choice, but a deeper societal issue rooted in gender inequality.

What’s particularly concerning is the

death rates from abortion complications have more than doubled, from six percent in 2016 to 14 percent in 2024.

The urban-rural divide further compounds these issues as the disparity in modern contraceptive use reflects broader inequalities in healthcare access and highlights the failure of current distribution systems to reach remote areas effectively. The government’s inability to

not just a technological gap, but a persistent societal assumption that family planning is primarily a woman’s responsibility. As US biologist Gregory Pincus predicted in 1964, the development of male contraceptives would have to overcome “the attitude of men”—a prophecy that remains relevant even now.

The knowledge gap between genders is equally troubling. A 2020 survey by BBS found that only 29 percent of men had knowledge about family planning methods, compared to 61 percent of women in Bangladesh. More concerning still, only 12 percent of men believed they should be responsible for family planning, while 69 percent of women recognised it as a shared responsibility. This disparity in awareness and accountability perpetuates a cycle where women’s reproductive autonomy is compromised by men’s disengagement.

Recent developments in male contraception, including the clinical trial of YCT-529 in the UK and the promising NES/T hormonal gel in the US, suggest that new options for men might finally become available within the next decade. However, these advancements will mean little without corresponding shifts in cultural attitudes and healthcare policies in least developed countries like Bangladesh.

The solution requires a comprehensive overhaul of current approaches. First, there must be increased education and awareness campaigns specifically targeting men about their role in family planning. Second, healthcare policies need to ensure consistent availability and affordability of contraception options. The recent shortages of pills and injectable methods at the field level demonstrate the devastating impact of supply chain failures. Third, there needs to be a reversal of the privatisation trend in contraception access, ensuring that family planning remains a public health priority

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The global context adds another layer to this discussion. While women have access to a wide array of contraceptive options—from daily pills to long-term implants and IUDs—men’s options have remained unchanged since the 1960s: condoms or vasectomy. These limited choices indicate

rather than a commercial opportunity. Finally, there must be a fundamental shift in societal attitude about reproductive responsibility.

The burden of birth control shouldn’t rest solely on women’s shoulders. Until our male counterparts recognise family planning as a shared responsibility, and until healthcare systems and societies support this view, women will continue to bear both the physical and emotional costs of contraception.

Analysing Trump’s territorial ambitions in Gaza, Ukraine, and Greenland



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President Donald Trump is smart. He wants to pull off economic, strategic, and political interests on three seemingly unrelated fronts—Gaza, Ukraine, and Greenland (GUG)—all at once. While these territories may appear disparate, a closer examination reveals common threads that suggest a broader US worldview, which Trump and its dominant elites represent, driven by strategic, military, and political goals. Unlike his predecessor, Trump has shown an inclination to avoid direct military conflicts while seeking to profit from both war-like situations and times of peace.

One of the most striking commonalities among Trump’s GUG targets is the prospect of economic and strategic gains, particularly through access to valuable natural resources, such as rare earth elements (REE). These critical minerals are used in almost every piece of advanced technology: semiconductors, mobile phones, computers, tablets, computer screens, hard drives, batteries, wind turbines, fuel cells, MRI machines, X-ray machines, missiles, and fighter jets. The list is endless. REEs are essential for today’s economy; without them, the world would come to a grinding stop.

China became the dominant global producer of REEs in the 1980s after the US industry declined due to stricter regulations. It strategically invested in REE technology and production, becoming the leading nation in controlling intellectual property rights and processing facilities. Consequently, all existing REE mines outside China, save for a few exceptions, export raw materials to China

for processing and value addition. Beijing thus has a chokehold over Washington, which Trump wants to break, for which securing alternative REE sources is essential.

It’s no wonder that Greenland’s enormous deposits of REEs are on all big players’ radars, especially Washington’s. Securing Greenland’s REE mines could give the US a strategic advantage in the highly competitive race for these critical raw materials. This is all the more critical for Washington because some Greenlandic politicians consider Chinese investments an opportunity for job creation, economic development, and even a stepping stone to independence from Denmark.

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Trump’s Greenland bid is also about strengthening a strategic military base. The existing US Pituffik Space Base—previously known as Thule Air Base until early 2023—is vital for US military operations in the Arctic, and expanding US influence there would help counteract Russian ambitions. With its



President Donald Trump’s proposed plan involves scooping up \$500 billion worth of REEs for Ukraine for the US in exchange for brokering a peace deal between Ukraine and Russia.

FILE PHOTO: REUTERS

melting ice caps and emerging trade routes, the Arctic presents a new frontier for military and economic interests, making Greenland a valuable asset for Washington in countering China and Russia.

As for Gaza, the eastern Mediterranean region has become the focus of exploration for natural gas deposits—resources that hold significant economic promise for Israel and US interests in energy security. Ensuring access to these resources amid geopolitical tensions may be pivotal to Washington’s strategic calculations.

Gaza will also fit nicely into Washington’s expanding military network, offering a secure base to help bolster its strategic influence across the Middle East. This will give Washington greater oversight over a volatile area, allowing it to counter hostile regional

powers and receive crucial military support from a well-supplied base.

The Gaza plan may also be a mere negotiating tactic. Still, it has strengthened the ultra-nationalist Jewish supporters of both Trump and Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, strengthening their positions in the respective domestic fronts. However, it must be noted that Trump’s Gaza rhetoric has raised legal, moral, ethical, and political questions. History shows that plans to take over hostile territories backfired and ended up in catastrophic consequences, as seen in Iraq and Afghanistan. Nonetheless, it will enhance Trump’s stature as a dealmaker among his supporters.

Like Greenland, Ukraine is also rich in REEs, with 22 of 34 rare earth deposits. Trump’s proposed plan involves scooping up

\$500 billion worth of these REEs in exchange for brokering a peace deal, highlighting a transactional view of foreign policy, where US interests dominate negotiations. Besides, Ukraine plays a crucial role in the global energy landscape as a key transit country for natural gas from Russia to Europe. Control over Ukraine translates into substantial economic leverage in European energy markets. Trump left European leaders scratching their heads by making a dramatic shift in US strategy as he poured cold water on Kyiv’s wishes to join NATO and agreed to negotiate a settlement with Russian President Vladimir Putin to end the war.

Nonetheless, Washington will remain an important geopolitical player in this crucial region. Ukraine is edging towards becoming the ground for another “forever war” draining billions of dollars from Washington’s coffers, which the real estate tycoon will hate to see. His business instincts followed a path of promptly ending it and securing the best possible deal, which, in this case, involved his aforementioned claim on Ukraine’s REEs. This would nicely supplement Greenlandic supplies to break free from Beijing’s chokehold. The deal will also ensure Washington’s continued influence over Kyiv, which has been the plan since the 1998 book *The Grand Chessboard* by President Jimmy Carter’s national security adviser, Zbigniew Brzezinski.

Even a partial success of Trump’s GUG bid would highlight his domestic and international standing. By proposing territorial takeovers or enhanced US involvement, Trump positioned himself as a decisive US leader with a global vision, however flawed, capable of navigating complex geopolitical landscapes. Crafting a narrative of US intervention as a stabilising force could redirect public attention from domestic issues to the international arena, reinforcing a nationalistic agenda that will resonate with many voters. How far will Trump go to achieve his ambitions?