

## Break the silence on domestic violence

### New BBS survey reveals alarming prevalence of intimate partner abuse

A major survey carried out by the Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics (BBS) in collaboration with the UNFPA has confirmed our worst fears: that women are three times more likely to face physical abuse and over 14 times more likely to suffer sexual violence from their husbands than from others. According to the Violence Against Women Survey 2024—based on interviews with 27,476 women—54 percent of the respondents reported experiencing physical and/or sexual abuse by their husbands at some point in their marital lives. Moreover, 70 percent experienced at least one form of abuse—physical, sexual, emotional or economic—at some stage. These figures are staggering, even if not entirely surprising, given the silence enforced on intimate partner violence (IPV) in our typically conservative society.

To understand how widespread this has become, it is sufficient to note that 41 percent of the respondents reported being abused by their intimate partners during the 12-month survey period alone. And the fact that 76 percent of women in rural areas and 75.6 percent in urban areas faced such abuse—with smaller margins of difference among divisions than one would have expected—shows how this has transcended geographical divides. This may come as a surprise since urban households are often thought to be more educated. The types of abuse experienced by married women are also diverse, with the most common being controlling behaviour and emotional abuse, which underscores the severity of psychological violence in relationships.

This landmark national survey—the third of its kind—offers comprehensive insights into the scale and impact of violence against women. Only the other day, we raised alarm about the frequent incidents of rape and sexual violence being reported across the country. Among such crimes, IPV is one that deserves to be particularly highlighted because of the silence around it, with many frowning upon even the mere acknowledgment of abuse within marriages. The survey's finding that 64 percent of the victims never share their experiences—and only 7.4 percent seek legal action—is a stark reminder of how deeply ingrained this silence is. It may stem from a desire to protect family reputation, concerns for children's well-being, and the perception that such abuse is “normal.” Whatever the cause may be, the culture of silence and denial only enables the perpetrators, helping perpetuate domestic violence through generations.

There is, therefore, no alternative to raising awareness and encouraging married women to speak out without fearing stigma and judgement. Equally importantly, men must be engaged in this effort—through education, community programmes, and stricter accountability—to end the impunity that allows such abuse to persist. At the same time, the government must act on the findings of the BBS survey and implement its recommendations so that there are greater protections against all forms of gender-based violence, including domestic violence.

## Kidney patients need support at CMCH

### Comprehensive action needed to ensure viable kidney treatment for all

We are concerned about the crisis of space and resources at the nephrology ward of Chattogram Medical College Hospital (CMCH). According to a report by this daily, despite increasing demand for kidney treatment, this unit remains overcrowded, forcing many patients to receive treatment on the floor. Established with 25 beds in 1991, it now has 40 beds, but this is too inadequate considering the huge number of patients that flock to the facility from Chattogram and the neighbouring districts.

The bed shortage is not the only problem here, however. Dialysis facilities at the CMCH are also quite inadequate. There are nine haemodialysis machines that can serve only 32 patients twice a week. A public-private partnership initiative, comprising 31 machines, has extended services to more patients, but the number of patients seeking dialysis is still almost three times the hospital's capacity. While private clinics offer haemodialysis, their cost is prohibitive for most. Unfortunately, dialysis is the only viable treatment for end-stage kidney failure (ESKF) patients, so a lack of access can have devastating consequences for them. Moreover, a kidney transplant initiative launched at the CMCH in 2008 was later suspended due to a lack of resources and trained personnel.

The CMCH case sums up the overall experience of kidney patients in Bangladesh: lack of treatment options as well as their exorbitant costs. According to a BIDS study unveiled in December, 93 percent of the families of kidney patients experienced financial distress in accessing dialysis across public, private, and NGO-run hospitals. In a country where an estimated 200–250 people per million develop ESKF every year and require dialysis, the average monthly treatment cost of Tk 46,426 is too high, given that our average monthly household income is just Tk 32,422. As per the BIDS study, 19.5 percent of the surveyed kidney patients received fewer dialysis sessions than medically recommended because of the high cost, jeopardising their health further.

This situation deserves to be addressed with the highest priority. Given the dependence on the CMCH in the broader region of Chattogram, the nephrology ward there must be expanded to accommodate more patients, while new specialised kidney care facilities should also be established. Given the growing number of kidney patients in Bangladesh, a similar approach should also be adopted across the country.

## THIS DAY IN HISTORY



### World's first national park established

On this day in 1872, Yellowstone National Park, situated in the western United States and designated a UNESCO World Heritage site in 1978, was established by the US Congress as the country's—and the world's—first national park.

# Will Hasina's shadow continue to loom over Dhaka-Delhi ties?



WINKERS AWEIGH!

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Sheikh Hasina's “leaked” phone call conversations started surfacing about two weeks after she fled to Delhi while facing a people's uprising. The audio clips began circulating on social media with the deposed prime minister feigning a candid conversation, but in fact passing on messages to her party cadres. In one conversation, she said she was not far away, quite close by actually... and she could enter Bangladesh in a jiffy if needed. In another clip, she was heard saying, as she did more recently, that those attacking the houses of Awami League faithfuls had houses of their own, too. The suggestion of counterattacks and incitement of arson was evident.

In his interview with the Indian state-run news agency Press Trust of India about a month after taking over as the interim head of government, Prof Muhammad Yunus was clear: India could keep their trusted ally, but they would have to keep her quiet. *The Hindu* reported on September 5, “Muhammad Yunus, the head of Bangladesh's interim government, has said that former Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina making political remarks from India is an ‘unfriendly gesture,’ asserting that she must remain silent to prevent the discomfort to both countries until Dhaka requests her extradition.”

Yunus was quoted saying, “If India wants to keep her until the time Bangladesh (government) wants her back, the condition would be that she has to keep quiet.”

**The interim government has always made it clear that it does not mind if Hasina remains in India for the time being (provided that she refrains from public speeches) until her trial is completed when the Bangladesh government will look to have her extradited. So far, India has not spoken about it definitively and will presumably drag its feet for as long as possible.**

The “leaked” phone conversations stopped surfacing.

Within a couple of months, the ousted premier emerged on social media again, this time addressing large crowds virtually. There was one in London on December 10 that attracted much attention.

The Indian foreign secretary's visit on December 9 provided Dhaka with another opportunity to express its ire about Hasina speaking in public. It was clear from deliberations of both sides

that the message had been sent and duly received. Vikram Misri went back to report to the parliamentary standing committee on external affairs, headed by Congress leader Shashi Tharoor, that “India does not endorse deposed Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina's criticism of the interim government in Bangladesh and it remains a pinprick in India-Bangladesh relationship,” according to a report in *The Hindu*. And again, Hasina stopped speaking in public.

More recently, earlier in February, Sheikh Hasina's scheduled address



VISUAL: SALMAN SAKIB SHAHRIYAR

triggered mass anger which is said to have led to the demolition of what remained (it had been partially destroyed in the aftermath of Awami League's fall in August last year) of her father's iconic house on Dhanmondi Road 32. This was the same house where Bangladesh's founding president, Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, had been assassinated with his entire family (Hasina and her sister were abroad at that time). This was also the same house that had been one of the nerve centres of Bangladesh's independence movement. It had been turned into a museum and demolition of this house was a loss. But the anger that surged among people was perhaps because Hasina and her cohorts, are still to exhibit even a glimmer of admission, let alone repentance, that they were wrong. The former premier, who will perhaps be remembered as an ousted autocrat, remains boastful and completely oblivious to her misdeeds. Instead, she keeps repeating her intentions to mount a comeback and hold trials of her detractors.

The resulting frenzy lasted for a few days when enraged people also attacked houses of other Awami League leaders in Dhaka and elsewhere in the country, besides the one in Dhanmondi.

The interim government then issued a protest to India saying Hasina should not be allowed to make such “false and fabricated” statements. In response, Delhi summoned the Bangladesh envoy to convey that “India desires a positive, constructive and mutually beneficial relationship with Bangladesh, which has been reiterated several times.”

Answering media queries about the Bangladeshi envoy being summoned, Indian foreign ministry spokesperson Randhir Jaiswal went on to add that Delhi had said it was “regrettable that regular statements made by Bangladesh authorities continue to portray India negatively” holding them responsible for internal governance issues. “These statements by Bangladesh are in fact responsible for the persistent negativity.”

The foreign ministry official clarified that Sheikh Hasina was speaking “in her individual capacity” and that India had nothing to do with it.

The change of stance is obvious, as is the message. India could not have been clearer that it is not going to hold back Hasina or discourage her from speaking out publicly. The interim government will have to figure out how to resolve whatever problems that might trigger within Bangladesh.

While there are no laws to restrict exiled political leaders—or autocrats, for that matter—from making public statements, precedence might be said to have contributed to certain protocols for the host country.

For instance, Idi Amin of Uganda was granted asylum in Saudi Arabia but forbidden from engaging in politics. In fact, it is reported that Idi Amin was under constant surveillance to ensure that he had no direct contact with Ugandan politics. He was never allowed to return to Uganda.

Ferdinand Marcos of the Philippines was flown to Hawaii with US military assistance where he was given asylum, but the US refused to let him make a political comeback from US soil. Despite his attempts to maintain influence in Filipino politics, the US discouraged him from such engagement.

Mengistu Haile Mariam of Ethiopia fled to Zimbabwe with Robert Mugabe's

assistance where he was granted asylum. Zimbabwe refused repeated extradition requests from Ethiopia for crimes against humanity, but Mengistu was mostly kept away from politics. He continues to live in Zimbabwe under state protection.

Clearly, then, India's refusal to discourage, or restrict, Hasina indicates that it is not too eager to placate the Bangladesh government. Is this a sign for the kind of relationship India wants with Bangladesh? Although it has not been always articulated, except that one time by the Indian army chief, the Indian undertone has always been that it does not quite consider this interim government worthy of its full attention or due consideration since it is not elected.

The latest statement clarifies that India will let Hasina speak whether it bothers Bangladesh or not. But that is just one aspect. It also suggests that India still considers Hasina valuable (or

might we say bankable?) and will not lay down restrictions for such a friend only to please Bangladesh's incumbent government. Although there appeared to have been some encouraging movement on both sides, the bilateral relations have remained somewhat wary.

The interim government has always made it clear that it does not mind if Hasina remains in India for the time being (provided that she refrains from public speeches) until her trial is completed when the Bangladesh government will look to have her extradited. So far, India has not spoken about it definitively and will presumably drag its feet for as long as possible. If the bilateral relations remain as they are, India is unlikely to extradite the ousted premier to face trials in Bangladesh, for which she could be given the capital punishment. But that will be later.

Following the foreign ministers' meeting in the Omani capital, there was little substance in what either of them said about their discussions. They touched all the points but refused to give away the specifics. But since then, Bangladesh's council of advisers have quieted down on their India rhetoric, while Hasina has also gone quiet in what appears to be a strained détente.

## The real picture of Bangladeshi corporate

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The experience of working for a corporation is not much different globally. Commuting between home and work beating traffic or overcrowded public transit, working eight hours, day in and day out, five days a week—six days a week for jobs that require “essential” extended hours of service, in exchange for a steep remuneration for the extra workday per week. Greece, for instance, introduced a labour law in September 2023 that allowed employers the option of enforcing six-day work weeks by paying an additional 40 percent of the daily wage for every 6th day of the week, according to Al Jazeera.

In Bangladesh, however, it is commonplace for employees to be overworked and underpaid. Poor working conditions here is no breaking news, but it is mostly sidelined or forgotten, reduced to a daily inconvenience. Yet, being ranked as one of the worst 10 countries in the world for eight years in a row in the International Trade Union Confederation's Global Rights Index

should give us reason to give this matter a second thought.

Unclear working hours that often extend beyond eight hours, six-day work weeks by default with no additional remunerations, little to no proper guidelines on salary structures leads to the employees' plight. Employees in the lower rungs have little to no wiggle room, and their only motivation, mostly, to continue up the corporate ladder is to someday wear the boot that presses down on them.

Much like most other issues in Bangladesh, no consequence for labour law violation allows employers to treat the law as a mere suggestion, while the exploited labour force bear the consequences. Job descriptions are vague; basic salary structures and gross salaries are often created out whimsically, with the bare minimum being offered. Gross salaries nowadays often start from Tk 25,000 a month, when the rent alone costs between Tk 10,000 and Tk 14,000 in places like Mirpur and Savar in Dhaka.

In my opinion, a “Yes, Sir” culture has also contributed to the deterioration of work culture in Bangladesh. With nearly no objection being raised against the exploitation, local employers are given the opportunity to become bolder with their grips on their employees. What can the employees do to tackle

such a situation? If they protest, the management's common response is, “You are free to find a better job with better salary and benefits elsewhere.” People feel they have no choice but to sit quietly and bear with the blows.

The legal system does little to help corporate employees. Despite all the

**Nobody can argue with the fact that a satisfied workforce would lead to better productivity, hence better growth. But even then, without proper enforcement of the law, it would not be possible to reverse the dystopia that the Bangladeshi corporate job sector has become.**

blatant violations from corporate employers, when was the last time we read an article underlining something as simple as a case against an employer over improper employment culture? We have barely ever heard of a case being filed successfully against an unscrupulous employer, since such cases are promptly silenced and never see the light of day.

The Bangladesh Labour Act, 2006 has barely seen any useful amendments