

INTERNATIONAL WOMEN'S DAY

The grim truth behind the Lalmatia GBV case

Mahiya Tabassum
is a member of the editorial team at The Daily Star.

MAHIYA TABASSUM

On March 1, a man took offence to two women smoking at a tea stall in Dhaka's Lalmatia area. He allegedly verbally abused them, which duly offended the women, leading to an altercation followed by a crowd gathering at the scene and allegedly assaulting the women in public.

This incident, under the guise of moral policing, is yet another example of the deteriorating state of women's rights and safety in Bangladesh. What's more alarming is how the case was handled by the authorities, government representatives, and media, who repeatedly tried to water down the gravity of the incident.

While there have been several protests demanding the resignation of Home Affairs Adviser Lt Gen (retd) Jahangir Alam Chowdhury for his failure to curb the rising violence, the incident in Lalmatia led to another one organised by the Bangladesh Against Rape and Abuse, a platform consisting of female

a man screaming and cursing at two women while a silent crowd watched. "I realised it was an act of moral policing and joined the women in protest, defending them against the man's baseless accusations of smoking 'weed' when they were simply having cigarettes and tea. The man continued his tirade, supported by a few bystanders who called him a 'murubbi.' At one point, after being subjected to relentless verbal abuse and intimidation, one of the victims threw tea at Rintu. He then physically attacked the woman, grabbing her by the hair, slapping and kicking her," he recounted.

As he stepped forward to stop the attack, his attempts to de-escalate the situation were met with further violence by Rintu and other people in the crowd, leaving him with visible injuries. "My face was bloodied, and my clothes were soon stained with it. I struggled to protect myself, but the blows kept coming," he recalled. The sheer brutality of the attack

Such coerced compromises in gender-based violence (GBV) cases often serve to protect perpetrators rather than delivering justice. This is part of a larger pattern where the police actively discourage victims from filing cases to suppress crime statistics. The reluctance to hold perpetrators accountable only reinforces a culture of impunity, where women are expected to endure harassment and violence without any recourse to justice.

activists and concerned citizens. Protesters burned an effigy of the home adviser, called for his resignation, and condemned the inaction against Golam Mostakim Rintu, the man who incited the assault on the women.

The first-hand account from an intervener, who was also assaulted by the crowd at the scene, paints a disturbing picture. Wishing to remain anonymous, the 25-year-old said he saw

left him shaken, yet his testimony remains a crucial piece of evidence exposing the savagery of mob justice.

In an 11-second video footage secured by this author, the female victims in Lalmatia are seen surrounded by a crowd consisting of at least 20-30 people beating them indiscriminately. Yet, the authorities' response to this incident have been shockingly inadequate. In fact, the

home adviser's response was not only tone-deal but legally and morally flawed. Instead of condemning the mob attack, he focused on the supposed offence of smoking in public spaces. However, according to the Smoking and Use of Tobacco Products (Control) Act, 2005, the location where the incident took place—a roadside tea stall—does not qualify as a designated non-smoking public place. His attempt to shift focus from the violence to the act of smoking is a blatant effort to justify

on grave provocation. However, despite the clear violations of sections 354, 509 and 504, no immediate legal action was taken against the perpetrators. Instead, the victims were allegedly pressured into signing an *aposhnama* (compromise agreement).

When contacted, the officer in-charge (OC) of Mohammadpur police station claimed that "people's faith in the police is shaken post-August 5 and they are being blamed for baseless reasons," and dismissed concerns

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In a further display of the authorities' apathy, Environment Adviser Syeda Rizwana Hasan echoed the OC's stance in her recent press briefing, referring to the mob assault as a "heated argument" between the involved parties and distancing the government from any responsibility using the compromise agreement as a "final resolution"—an invalid document, according to experts.

It is equally troubling how certain media agencies played a role in downplaying the significance of a protest that took place on March 3, condemning this incident. Some of them published reports with misleading headlines that framed the demonstration as a protest against the government's decision to ban smoking in public places. One news channel went as far as linking the protest—which was held to raise voices against the ongoing trend of GBV and moral policing of women—to an "Indian conspiracy." This attempt to manipulate the narrative is clearly aimed at delegitimising the protest and silencing calls for action against GBV.

The Lalmatia incident serves as a stark reminder of the deep-rooted patriarchy that pervades every level of society in Bangladesh. From the case of being harassed for something as trivial as wearing a *tipi* to the recent rise in the cases of rape, sexual assault and digital harassment, it is clear that misogyny is deeply embedded in our social structures and collective psyche. It is not just the perpetrators of violence who must be held accountable; it is the entire ecosystem—spanning government officials, the media, law enforcement, and political parties—that continues to perpetuate this cycle of abuse. As the fight against GBV continues, it is critical that the public refuses to be silenced by social stigma and ostracism, disinformation and institutional biases, and stands firm against the structures that enable such violence.

The fight does not end with one protest. The resistance must not stop; for in every protest, every voice raised against injustice, lies the hope for a safer, more just future.



VISUAL: SHAIKH SULTANA JAHAN BADHON

the assault and absolve the perpetrators. By doing that, he bolstered the narrative of the alleged attacker who played the religious card to "justify" his moral policing of the women. Does this mean women are no longer entitled to safety and their basic human rights? More disturbingly, does this mean that the religious sensitivities of some people can now be used as an excuse for perpetrating gender-based violence? The home adviser's statement is dangerous as it attempts to legitimise moral policing and vigilante violence. Such rhetoric not only emboldens perpetrators but also implies that the state is unlikely to prioritise women's right to safety over hurting some people's religious sentiments.

The Bangladesh Penal Code of 1860 clearly criminalises the actions of Rintu and the mob under several sections, including Section 354 (criminal assault on a woman with intent to outrage her modesty), Section 509 (verbal abuse intended to insult a woman's modesty), Section 504 (intentional insult to provoke a breach of peace), and Section 352 (punishment for assault or criminal force otherwise than

about police inaction. He also emphasised that the victims' parents had signed a compromise agreement with the perpetrators, claiming that the issue had been "resolved."

The *aposhnama* signed between the victims' families and the perpetrators is legally invalid on multiple grounds, according to law experts. Firstly, under Bangladesh's criminal law, offences such as assault and harassment are non-compoundable, meaning they cannot be settled outside the court. Any attempt to bypass this process is a violation of due legal procedure. Secondly, the agreement was signed by the victims' parents rather than the victims themselves, undermining their autonomy and legal standing as adults. Furthermore, the agreement was allegedly signed under duress (being forced to act against your will through threats or pressure). According to one victim, someone identifying as a powerful individual called her father and coerced him into signing it. The fact that law enforcement facilitated this agreement instead of proceeding with legal action reflects a gross misuse of discretionary power.

Have those in power failed Bangladesh's women?

Dr Samina Luthfa
teaches at the Department of Sociology of Dhaka University.

SAMINA LUTHFA

The slogan of this year's International Women's Day is about ensuring rights, equality, and empowerment for all women and girls. It's an important and necessary call. However, as Bangladeshi, if we want to achieve this, a simple question must be asked: even though we have had women in the highest positions of political leadership in the country for decades, why are our women still facing oppression, violence, and discrimination?

The reality is that although women have held leadership positions for many years, their politics have not necessarily been for women. They participated in a political structure—built on aggression and the suppression of dissent—that is deeply patriarchal. The politics they have practised has not been about transforming these structures but rather operating within them, often in ways that reinforce the very systems that marginalise women. They have been assessed in relation to their male family members—father, husband or other male relatives in power once—rather than as independent political figures. Simply having a woman in the highest office does not automatically lead to gender equality, nor does it ensure the rights or empowerment of all women.

True empowerment requires a fundamental restructuring of power itself, where women can not only participate in politics but also assume decision-making roles that influence governance, policymaking, and the direction in which the country is heading. Participation alone is not enough. Women must have the authority to lead, make decisions, and shape the structures that govern society. Without that, their presence in leadership remains largely symbolic.

However, even before reaching those leadership roles, women in Bangladesh face deep structural barriers. Women who enter this space often find themselves forced to conform to the set rules, which are often imposed unofficially. And when they try to change them, they face backlash. The political system, despite having women at the top for many years, has remained male-dominated in its norms, expectations, and informal rules.

Economically too, women remain disadvantaged. A political career requires resources—money, network, influence. But women, even when they earn, often do not have

full control over their income. Their inheritance rights remain unequal and their financial dependency on male relatives limits their ability to operate independently in politics. In the Gender Parity Index of 2024, Bangladesh remains at a low rank in terms of economic equality. Women's participation in the workforce has either stagnated or declined, and the income gap between men and women has widened significantly. This economic disparity directly impacts political participation. If

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women do not have financial independence, how can they sustain themselves in politics? How can they fund campaigns, build networks, or take leadership roles? Politics, at the end of the day, is about resources. And when resources are concentrated in the hands of men, so is power.

This brings us to the question of safety. Why, despite decades of women holding power, have we not been able to ensure basic security for women? The answer lies in the deeper cultural structures that shape our society. Women are still perceived through a patriarchal lens, either as possessions or as objects of desire. This creates two simultaneous realities: women are seen as something that belongs to men, much like a piece of land or property, and at the same time, they are objectified in a way that makes them vulnerable to violence. As a result, when a woman is sexually harassed or assaulted, the blame often falls on her rather than on the perpetrator. The system does not protect her and in many cases, actively works against her.

That is why gender-based violence never seems to decrease. It is not simply a matter of law enforcement or governance, but of how society constructs women's roles and rights.

women activists—is not random. It is a backlash. There is fear among those who have long controlled power, or are aspiring to get to power without affecting the status quo—fear that this new wave of women in leadership is not just symbolic, but real. That is why they are being targeted, both online and offline. And these attacks are coming from multiple directions, from groups with vested interests that will be destroyed if women vote en masse in elections. And that is because when women take power—not just as figureheads but with real agency—it threatens the very foundation of patriarchal control over politics.

Despite decades of so-called women leadership, real equality has remained out of our reach. That's because true equality can come only by dismantling the structures that keep women marginalised. It means economic independence, legal rights, safety, and a political culture that does not force women to conform to a system built by and for men. Until these changes happen, the struggle for women's rights and empowerment will continue, regardless of how many women occupy the highest offices in the country.

CROSSWORD BY THOMAS JOSEPH

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YESTERDAY'S ANSWERS

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