

Our democracy needs women

Why are women so invisible in the political landscape?

Although the political landscape in Bangladesh has become more vibrant, with both old and new parties trying to woo the public with their promises, the scope of women's political participation continues to be quite poor. The dominance of men in politics and the absence of any structural changes to address gender discrimination, which excludes women from exercising their political agency, are major deterrents. Furthermore, the unrelenting rise of violence against women—from rape to online sexual harassment—has created an unsafe environment for all women in general, even more so for those with political aspirations.

According to the Human Rights Support Society (HRSS), nearly 12,000 women and girls faced torture and violence in the last five years. During that period, 1,089 women and girls were gang-raped, and 207 were murdered after sexual assault. At least 50 victims took their own lives due to the trauma they had endured. The latest incidents of moral policing, mob violence, and sexual harassment in public spaces targeting women, and the administration's ineffectual attempts to punish perpetrators, have created an even more insecure environment for them. Added to this is the vitriolic online sexual harassment of women, whether they are journalists, activists, political figures, or celebrities, all of which discourage women's participation in politics. And what is most disturbing is the perception of impunity due to the lack of enforcement of laws, which has emboldened perpetrators of violence against women.

We are encouraged by the fact that the new student parties have strong women leaders, although their numbers are still too few. These women face the daunting task of not only challenging the inherent male chauvinism of society but also making public appearances and raising their voices in an environment that is quite hostile towards women. The stark difference between women's presence during the July uprising protests and today's political rallies is telling.

The interim government must take stern measures to deter groups and individuals who believe they have a license to harass or attack women. Online harassers must also be brought to book. The government, through its law enforcement agencies, must create a safe environment for women in public spaces so that they can freely participate in politics—whether at protests, rallies, or simply walking in the streets without fear.

While security is a basic requirement for women's political participation, structural discrimination and tokenism are major barriers. During the Awami League's rule, women members of parliament were selected for their loyalty to the party rather than their leadership qualities. Without direct elections, the scope for developing effective women leaders was severely curtailed. The Electoral Reform Commission and the Constitution Reform Commission have proposed increasing the number of parliamentary reserve seats for women to 100 (from 50), with all seats filled through direct elections. This is bound to make a significant difference in the capabilities of women members of parliament. However, political parties must also honour the mandatory allocation of at least 33 percent of all committee positions to women—something that has been absent in major political parties. Bangladesh has much to gain from having more women politicians who earn their positions through merit rather than nepotism or dynastic politics.

No more cost and time overruns

Govt must quickly complete Rooppur and other important projects

It is encouraging that the government has prioritised the Rooppur Nuclear Power Plant project in its revised Annual Development Plan. The project has received the highest allocation for a single project in the revised ADP, as the government wants to make it operational as quickly as possible. After Rooppur, the Matarbari coal-fired power plant project has received the second-highest allocation. Three other Jica-funded projects on Dhaka's transport system—MRT-6, MRT-1, and MRT-5—have also received large allocations in the revised ADP. However, the allocations for most other projects have been cut as their implementation have been slow or hampered due to political unrest in the country.

The timely completion of the Rooppur and Matarbari projects is crucial to meeting the country's growing energy demands. According to the original project proposal for Rooppur, Unit-1 of the power plant was supposed to go into operation in December 2022, Unit-2 in October 2023, and the entire project was scheduled for completion by December 31, 2025. However, implementation has been delayed for several reasons—with the government now wanting to complete it by December 2027. Reportedly, the total cost of the Rooppur Nuclear Power Plant project is Tk 1,14,225 crore, with the majority financed by Russia. As of June last year, around Tk 75,000 crore had been spent from the total cost. In the revised ADP for FY25, the government approved Tk 2,16,000 crore for the project. Five other projects related to the electricity line, high-frequency telecommunications system, and water supply for the power plant also received an increased allocation.

The government must ensure that the funds are spent transparently, without corruption or irregularities. During the previous regime, excessive amounts were spent on purchasing furniture and other items for the officials and employees of the project, and the salaries fixed for them were also unusually high. We hope that such irregularities will not be repeated and that those involved in misconduct will be brought to book. This will set a precedent in a country where development projects are often mired in corruption.

Additionally, the government must ensure that this and other megaprojects do not cause any harm to the environment. Many of the country's megaprojects were undertaken by the previous government without conducting proper feasibility studies or obtaining the necessary environmental clearances. Going forward, we must move away from such poor practices. Finally, implementing these projects within the stipulated time and budget is crucial to preventing the misuse and waste of public funds.

Mob justice is not justice

The rule of law is the bedrock of any civilised nation



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In a civilised society, justice must be dispensed through legal channels, not through the hands of an enraged mob. Yet in Bangladesh, mob justice remains an enduring stain on our social fabric, exposing the failures of law enforcement and the growing distrust in the judicial system. How much longer will we tolerate such barbarism? How many more lives must be lost before we say, “enough is enough”?

Mob justice—where a group of people takes the law into their own hands, often inflicting brutal violence or even death upon an accused individual—has become alarmingly common. The victims of these frenzied attacks are often not hardened criminals but mere suspects, caught in the unforgiving grip of public paranoia. A man accused of theft, a woman behaving “unusually,” or even someone falsely rumoured to be a child abductor can become a target. In a country that aspires to uphold the rule of law, this is nothing short of a national disgrace.

Despite repeated calls for reform, the state has failed to take a firm stance against mob violence. The root of the problem lies in both inadequate law enforcement and an alarming lack of consequences. Perpetrators of mob lynchings often walk free because they are not seen as individual criminals but as part of an uncontrollable crowd. This impunity only emboldens others to do the same. If the justice system cannot ensure fair trials and lawful punishment, public confidence erodes, and mob rule takes over.

Recent incidents paint a terrifying picture. On March 3, two young men were lynched in Chattogram's Satkania after being suspected of robbery. No trial, no evidence—just swift, brutal execution at the hands of an enraged mob. A day earlier, in Char Fasson, Bhola, a man was subjected to unspeakable cruelty—his eyes gouged out and fingers severed—on mere suspicion of theft. On March 1, in Lalmatia, two young women were harassed and mobbed simply for smoking in public. These incidents are not isolated—they are part of a terrifying trend in which innocent people are assaulted, mutilated, and even killed without recourse to justice.



FILE VISUAL: STAR

Worse still, even law enforcement officers are falling victim to mob violence. In Chattogram's Patenga on February 28, a police sub-inspector was viciously attacked by a mob at a checkpoint. A traffic sergeant was recently assaulted for simply trying to do his job. When those meant to uphold the law become victims of unchecked public rage, what hope is there for ordinary citizens?

This escalating crisis demands a firm, zero-tolerance approach. The state must abandon its defensive posture and launch an all-out war against mob violence. Half-hearted condemnations and reactive measures will not suffice. Instead, we need aggressive policy changes, decisive enforcement, and clear legal consequences.

First, the police and other security forces must regain control. Officers must be empowered to act decisively, without fear of backlash or political interference. Currently, law enforcement officials hesitate to intervene in mob violence,

fearing public anger or political repercussions. This must change. The government must send a clear message—those who participate in mob lynchings will face immediate arrest and prosecution.

Second, swift legal action must be taken against perpetrators. Bangladesh already has laws in place to prevent mob violence, yet these laws

Finally, the government must acknowledge that mob justice is symptomatic of a deeper crisis—a failing legal system that does not inspire public trust. Many people resort to mob violence because they believe criminals will otherwise go unpunished. Strengthening the judiciary, ensuring faster case resolutions, and eliminating

are rarely enforced. Special courts should be established to fast-track trials of those involved in lynchings. A few high-profile convictions would send a strong message that mob justice will no longer be tolerated.

Third, community engagement is crucial. Political parties, religious leaders, and civil society organisations must actively campaign against mob violence. Too often, political divides prevent meaningful reform, but this issue transcends partisanship. It is a national problem that demands a united response.

Fourth, the role of social media in spreading panic and misinformation cannot be ignored. Many mob attacks are triggered by unverified rumours that spread like wildfire online. The government must invest in digital literacy campaigns to educate the public on the dangers of acting on misinformation. Simultaneously, tech companies and law enforcement should work together to track and remove incendiary content before it leads to violence.

corruption within law enforcement are critical to restoring public faith in the rule of law.

With the potential for mob violence increasing due to various reasons, the government must act now, deploying additional security forces to public spaces and making it clear that any form of vigilantism will be met with the full force of the law. If necessary, a special task force should be established, comprising the police, RAB, and military, to conduct joint operations aimed at dismantling criminal groups and preventing mob violence. Law enforcement must move from a passive to a proactive stance, ensuring that not a single instance of mob justice goes unchecked.

Enough is enough. We cannot allow our society to be governed by fear and chaos. The government must take decisive action, and we, as citizens, must demand nothing less than an end to this madness. The rule of law is the bedrock of any civilised nation—without it, we are lost.

Combating violence against women and adolescent girls

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A woman's right to live a life free of violence is not a privilege—it is a fundamental human right. Yet, for millions of women and girls worldwide, including in Bangladesh, this right is routinely denied and remains out of reach. As one of the most pervasive human rights violations, violence against women and girls not only impedes their potential but also limits a nation's progress, growth, and stability. It is not just an individual tragedy, but a lived reality and a systemic crisis that weakens families, communities, and the society at large.

In Bangladesh, the scale of the problem demands our urgent attention. Findings from the recent Violence Against Women Survey 2024 released by the Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics reveal a sobering reality—70 percent of women have experienced at least one form of intimate partner violence in their lifetime, with 41 percent facing such violence in the past year alone. The forms of intimate partner violence surveyed include physical, sexual, economic, and emotional violence, as well as controlling behaviours. Equally concerning is the prevalence of non-partner violence, which encompasses physical and sexual violence. About 16 percent of women reported experiencing non-partner

violence from relatives, neighbours, or strangers since the age of 15.

We must bear in mind that media reports are just the tip of the iceberg, as violence against women and girls is often silenced due to fear, stigma or lack of support systems. Service providers, civil society organisations, police, and health workers play a crucial role in responding to cases, yet their data only reflects incidents that are reported. The Violence Against Women Survey reveals a staggering 64 percent of survivors never share their experiences. Many believe it is a “normal” family matter. This silence is even more pronounced among older women, rural populations, and those facing multiple forms of discrimination. Data from service providers does not capture the scale of violence. The prevalence survey is the closest we can get to understanding the scale of violence against women.

The survey reveals that women in disaster-prone areas experience higher levels of violence than those in non-disaster-prone regions—74 percent of women in these areas have experienced intimate partner violence in their lifetime, compared to 68 percent in other parts of the country. The survey confirms what we have long recognised: the climate

crisis is not gender neutral. Disasters intensify existing inequalities, disrupt protection systems, and restrict women's and girls' access to essential services. With inadequate shelters and safety nets, women are at greater risk.

Furthermore, the survey reveals the intersectionality between gender and age, which deepens the vulnerabilities of adolescent girls. The data shows that married adolescent girls in Bangladesh experience disproportionately high levels of intimate partner violence in the last 12 months, making them the most affected age group. This is, unfortunately, linked to child marriage, which impacts nearly half of the girls in Bangladesh who are married before their 18th birthday. The adolescent girls are also highly vulnerable to non-partner violence.

One survey taker recalls being alarmed by the extent of violence experienced by older women. “Honestly, I didn't expect them to face violence at this stage of their lives,” she said. However, her perspective quickly shifted as she interviewed many older survivors of violence, who perhaps never disclosed their experiences to anyone before.

Even when survivors do come forward, they encounter several challenges—from social judgments to financial costs. According to the survey, out-of-pocket expenses for legal and medical support likely deter women from pursuing justice or treatment. High healthcare costs, lengthy legal processes, and fear of family backlash all converge to keep survivors trapped in cycles of violence.

There is an urgent need to expand survivor-centred multi-sectoral services and break the culture of silence around violence against women. Greater awareness of toll-free hotlines—999 and 109—is crucial as current use is low. Survivors need to have timely, compassionate, and comprehensive access to the Essential Services Package, which includes health, social services, police, and justice sectors. It is equally important to address the root causes of violence against women and harmful practices by investing in women's and girls' empowerment, leadership, education, and economic opportunities along with actively engaging men and boys as allies.

Ending the pandemic of violence against women is not just a moral obligation—it is essential for the nation's sustainable development. There are signs of hope. We have seen communities rally to end violence against women, local councils promote safe spaces, and youth speaking up against violence. The momentum for change is here. It requires sustained collective efforts from government institutions, civil society, development partners, media, and local communities.

If more women and girls can safely engage in their communities, schools, and workplaces, Bangladesh will be stronger—both in fulfilling its gender equality commitments and realising the sustainable development goals (SDGs). This is very much within reach, only if we act decisively, collectively, and with urgency.