

Why are so many girls still married early?

Govt must adopt a zero-tolerance approach to this scourge

Child marriage, early pregnancy, and sexual harassment and violence are among the most persistent challenges plaguing the lives of adolescent girls in Bangladesh. While resistance to these trends has grown over the years, recent studies suggest that progress has been minimal, if not entirely stagnant. For instance, child marriage, often caused by a combination of poverty, entrenched social norms, and legal enforcement gaps, remains a blot on the country's otherwise positive records in some socioeconomic aspects. A UNICEF report, released on International Women's Day, reveals that Bangladesh has the highest child marriage rate in Asia, with 51.4 percent of women aged 20-24 married before they turned 18. This is quite alarming.

Further details from the report—such as that 24 percent of young women give birth before 18, and 28 percent of girls aged 15-19 have experienced physical or sexual violence from their partners—show how widespread and devastating the impact of child marriage has been. Moreover, only 47 percent of married teenage girls have autonomy over reproductive health decisions. According to the report, Bangladesh is also one of seven countries with less than two percent of adolescent girls having digital literacy. Girls aged 15-24 are twice as likely as boys to be out of education, employment, or training, making them more vulnerable to poverty and exploitation.

These findings show how the stakes remain heavily stacked against adolescent girls, especially if married early. The question is, why are we failing to do anything about it? This is not just about how barriers to girls' education and personal autonomy are hindering their life prospects; it's also about how their lack of agency and social empowerment is putting them in life-threatening situations. As well as risky pregnancies, intimate partner violence, or violence by husbands, remains another serious concern. In a climate where, according to a recent study by the Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics, 54 percent of women experience physical and/or sexual abuse by husbands at some point, young wives are more vulnerable. The fact that this threat is rarely acknowledged by society reeks of the still-pervasive patriarchy that justifies or covers up such violence citing family reputation and children's well-being.

The reality is, child brides are children, too, and we need to be able to protect them from this scourge at any cost. Two persistent obstacles to ending child marriage are financial hardships and weak law enforcement—problems that transcend gender issues but which must be addressed precisely because of such devastating impacts. We urge the authorities to adopt a zero-tolerance approach to child marriage, regardless of the reason behind it, and address the issues that continue to fuel it.

Gorer Khal on its deathbed

Yet another example of a poorly executed project

It is appalling to witness our rivers, canals, and such water bodies die one after another due to encroachment, pollution, and mindless development. One such canal is Gorer Khal at the Baniachong upazila in Habiganj. According to a report, the 19.2-kilometre-long canal was once a lifeline for the region's agriculture, communication, and flood management. But it is now on the verge of death due to illegal encroachment, pollution, and siltation. The Bangladesh Water Development Board (BWDB) took up a project at a cost of Tk 7.16 crore in FY 2022-23 to excavate and revive it but failed to do so. What, then, was the point of taking up such a project?

Clearly, the project was not properly planned or executed. Reportedly, while the project was underway, the authorities focused on digging the canal's branches instead of excavating its main body. Moreover, the excavation was allegedly conducted without proper land measurement or clearing encroachments. Additionally, the soil dug from the canal was piled up along its banks, which washed back into it during the monsoon. And although a total of 4,000 trees were supposed to be planted along the banks, this was not done either. All this explains why, around a year and a half into the work, the project has failed to bring any positive results.

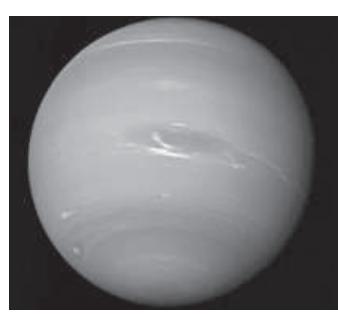
Local residents also alleged corruption and misappropriation of funds by those who implemented it. Although the canal's situation has not improved at all, the project authorities have claimed that they did as far as they could, which shows their inefficiency and lack of sincerity. Unfortunately, the situation of Gorer Khal and the excavation project undertaken by the BWDB is not unique. Hundreds of such ill-executed projects can be found across the country. For instance, only the other day, a report published in this daily revealed how bridges built over the canals of Barguna were collapsing due to the use of poor quality materials.

Corruption in development projects, whether large or small, was a recurring issue during the previous Awami League regime. This must come to an end. We urge the government to hold those responsible for such poorly planned projects accountable and reclaim canals like Gorer Khal to restore the vital lifelines of rural Bangladesh.

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On this day in 1781, English astronomer William Herschel observed the seventh planet from the Sun, Uranus—first described by him as “a curious either nebulous star or perhaps a comet.”



Priorities and challenges for the new education adviser



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MANZOOR AHMED

Education Adviser CR Abrar, newly appointed on March 5, spoke of his dream of an education system that would allow students to see their future within Bangladesh. Presumably, the education system would enable young people to acquire skills and competencies to realise their own goals in life and contribute to the nation's development. What actions can the adviser himself take, and what can he persuade the interim government to consider in promoting this indisputable objective?

The interim government has waded into reform efforts in many difficult, complex, and sensitive spheres. So far, 15 commissions and task forces have been set up. Many have submitted their reports, and consultations on building a consensus have begun. Education has been left out so far, despite demands from educationists and concerned citizens for an education reform initiative.

In the education sphere, the Ministry of Primary and Mass Education (MoPME) appointed a nine-member “consultation committee” last October. After four months of intensive work that included consultations with stakeholder groups and extensive field visits, the committee, headed by this author, submitted its report. It was formally received by the chief adviser on February 10. A more detailed technical report is to be submitted shortly.

The primary and non-formal education committee attempted to weigh the expectations and demands of diverse stakeholders and provided what it considered realistic and implementable recommendations for early, medium term, and longer term actions. Media reports and stakeholder reactions indicate that the report has been perceived positively. Moreover, the deliberative process and well-argued recommendations have had a calming effect, as evidenced by the absence of stakeholder protests, demands, and ultimatums in the primary education sub-sector. The diverse stakeholder groups are now watching to what extent and how the government demonstrates a good-faith and sincere effort to act on the recommendations. They will look for signals about how the recommendations are reflected in the upcoming FY2025-26 budget and the Fifth Primary Education

Development Program (PEDP5), now under preparation.

The primary and non-formal education sub-sector reform initiative is a positive but partial move that leaves major education sector concerns unaddressed. The committee report itself has pointed to the need for a comprehensive approach and holistic thinking about the education system, especially school education from pre-primary to pre-tertiary levels. This calls for political choices by the state on education reform beyond the remit of MoPME alone.

In December 2010, a national



VISUAL: MAHIYA TABASSUM

education policy was adopted by parliament, which is still in effect. However, no effort was made to implement it. Such an effort would have required assigning tasks and responsibilities for preparing an action plan, setting priorities and targets among and within education subsectors, mobilising and allocating resources, and monitoring progress. The 2010 policy itself recommended the formation of a permanent and statutory education commission to guide and oversee the implementation process. Political decision makers chose not to pursue this course.

Meanwhile, ad hoc, fragmented, uncoordinated, and partial subsector actions were taken without an overall mission or holistic strategy for the nation's education system. The education services mirrored or reproduced the prevailing social fault lines and economic classes in society. As a result, we see the growth of English-medium private schools

for English-medium schools. He might have added that a significant proportion of families below the poverty line send their children to one of various types of madrasas. He advises a serious probe into household schooling choices as both a possible cause and consequence of widening social disparities. Explaining the roots of disparities is necessary, but this can lead to remedial action only if decision makers see the need and feel the obligation for such actions.

It is unrealistic to expect that the interim government, given its uncertain tenure and the larger political context in which it operates, will break away completely from the pattern of an unequal and non-inclusive education system that has emerged over the decades. A radical change in policy and decision-making mechanisms, as well as in the mindset of key actors, is unlikely in the present context. These factors contribute to poor learning outcomes and unequal

life chances for the majority of children.

What the education adviser may aim for now is at least to move away from the fragmented and ad hoc decision-making approach—often dependent on individual ministry officials' preferences and the default mode of taking the path of least resistance, avoiding disruption, and postponing solutions, which often do not address the root of the problem and may even create greater problems in the future.

The experience with the consultation committee on primary and non-formal education highlights the value of a deliberative and dialogue-driven process, in which stakeholders have faith and trust. A consultative council consisting of academics and others with a reputation for being knowledgeable and fair-minded can serve as such a mechanism for the entire education sector. It would have to be somewhat different from a committee focused on a single sub-sector. The education sector encompasses major sub-sectors with distinct objectives, pedagogic approaches, beneficiaries, organisational arrangements, and state obligations. The challenges vary across primary and secondary education, vocational and technical skill development, higher general education, higher professional education, the parallel madrasa system, and non-formal lifelong learning. Policy responses and the scope of implementable measures by the state must be informed by insights into both the unique characteristics of each sub-sector and their interconnections. Therefore, a consultative council for the education sector should include sub-sector committees to ensure a holistic perspective is maintained.

The consultative council, among other functions, can guide the preparation of a medium-term (five-year) education sector plan and a longer-term (10-year) perspective plan. The government can also use it as a sounding board, seeking its advice for decision-making on critical issues. It should have an open-ended tenure and could eventually be replaced by a permanent national education commission under an elected government.

I propose that we begin rethinking our education system now, rather than deferring it to the post-election ruling party or parties. The past record of political parties of all stripes regarding education has not been stellar. Work done now, in an apolitical environment, to set the agenda, priorities, and strategies may help nudge political parties in the right direction. Appropriate policy-relevant research to inform policy deliberation should also be encouraged.

Can we revive our riverine transport?



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NASIM AHMED

Bangladesh, often called the “land of rivers,” has traditionally depended on its extensive river network for transportation. Inland water transport (IWT) has been integral to the country's economy, facilitating the movement of freight and passengers across regions. However, infrastructural advancements like the Padma Bridge have significantly impacted the dynamics of riverine transport.

Bangladesh boasts a vast network of more than 700 rivers, canals and streams (according to Bangladesh Water Development Board) with a total length of approximately 24,000 kilometres. However, the navigability of these waterways varies seasonally. During the monsoon season, only about 6,000 kilometres are navigable, which reduces to approximately 3,900 kilometres in the dry season.

Despite efforts to enhance this network, such as dredging projects, the overall length of navigable waterways has remained relatively stable, suggesting that the ongoing maintenance efforts primarily serve to preserve existing routes rather than expand them significantly.

Traditionally, inland waterways have been a cornerstone of Bangladesh's transportation system. According to the Bangladesh Inland Water Transport Authority (BIWTA), IWT is responsible for transporting over 50 percent of the country's total cargo and approximately 25 percent of passenger traffic. However, recent reports tend to argue that these figures have been declining.

The Bangladesh Inland Water Transport Corporation (BIWTC) manages a diverse fleet to support riverine transport. As of 2024, the fleet comprises 119 vessels, including 59 ferries, 20 passenger vessels, 16 coastal vessels, nine tugboats, and 15 cargo and container ships. Apart from that, thousands of private boats and ships are operating. However, the shift towards road and rail transport, coupled with challenges in maintaining navigable waterways, has led to a decrease in the operational efficiency of these vessels.

The inauguration of the Padma Bridge in June 2022 has drastically reduced travel times between Dhaka and the southwestern regions, significantly diverting traffic

from riverine routes to roadways. Consequently, passenger ferries have experienced a sharp decline, with daily trips reduced and staff members facing job losses. This shift has impacted rural livelihoods and low-income groups, as higher transport costs from reliance on road transport led to some increase in commodity prices.

Maintaining rivers' navigability is crucial for the sustainability of riverine transport. The BIWTA has undertaken numerous dredging projects to restore and expand waterways. Between 2010 and 2023, BIWTA reported an increase of 3,700 kilometres in navigable waterways. However, studies have revealed discrepancies between reported figures and on-ground realities. Many rivers listed as dredged remain non-navigable, suggesting that the effectiveness of these projects is limited. Factors such as unplanned construction, encroachment, and pollution impede the restoration of these waterways.

Despite the decline in usage, the IWT remains a cost-effective and environmentally friendly mode of transportation. Transporting goods by water is up to 50 percent cheaper than by road, primarily due to lower fuel costs and the ability to move larger cargo volumes in a single trip. Moreover, water transport contributes less to air pollution and traffic congestion than road transport. Recognising these advantages, there is a growing discourse on revitalising riverine transport to promote sustainable and inclusive economic

growth.

A multifaceted approach, including effective maintenance of waterways, strategic infrastructural planning, and policies, is needed to incentivise the use of riverine transport. Regular and targeted dredging can mitigate siltation and ensure consistent depth for vessel movement. Tidal River Management, which involves controlled flooding of specific areas to facilitate natural sediment deposition, will help enhance river depth and flow. Upgrading existing ports and developing new inland container terminals can alleviate congestion and promote efficient cargo handling.

The IWT sector has so far received a smaller share of funding. Although the 8th five-year plan (2020-2025) has increased this share, it remains below pre-1990 levels. Rebalancing investment towards IWT is crucial for its revitalisation.

Enhancing the capacity of organisations like the BIWTA is warranted. Developing multimodal connectivity by integrating services at ports like Pangaon with rail and road links can streamline cargo movement and reduce transit times. Enforcing stringent safety regulations and regular inspections can reduce accidents. Upgrading vessels to meet modern safety standards is imperative. Harmonising policies across different transport sectors can facilitate smoother operations and reduce bureaucratic hurdles, encouraging the use of riverine routes for both passenger and freight transport.

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