

Stop predatory gas price hike and reform the sector



M. Shamsul Alam is energy adviser at the Consumers Association of Bangladesh (CAB), and professor of electrical and electronic engineering at Daffodil University.

M. SHAMSUL ALAM

Consumers Association of Bangladesh (CAB) rejects Bangladesh Energy Regulatory Commission (BERC)'s proposal to increase gas prices for industrial and captive power generation, which the Ministry of Power, Energy and Mineral Resources has approved. Consumers protested and made their demands known during the public hearing on February 26, 2025.

According to the price hike proposal, if the gas price for industrial and captive power increases by Tk 75.72, the projected additional annual revenue would be around Tk 3,241 crore, assuming an annual gas supply of 28,224 million cubic metres. Additionally, the system loss in gas distribution and transmission is 13.53 percent, whereas BERC reports it as only 1.12 percent. The remaining losses result from waste and theft. If these were adjusted, the current pricing model would lead to Tk 10,870 crore in savings. The data shows that merely ensuring fair and rational VAT and dealing with system loss would prevent Tk 14,418 crore in expenses annually. However, instead of addressing the real system loss and predatory costs in gas supply, the Ministry of Power, Energy and Mineral Resources approved the price hike proposal, and BERC endorsed it. As a result, both entities stand accused of compromising consumer interests and rights, depriving consumers from fair energy pricing.

Moreover, the total gas supply in 2022-23, 2023-24, and 2024-25 was 28,640, 28,037, and 28,224 (estimated) million cubic metres, respectively. Domestic gas supply during these years was 22,651, 21,082, and 20,067 (estimated) million cubic metres, respectively. This gradual decline in gas supply in the country intensifies the energy crisis. Currently, 25 percent of the gas supply comes from LNG, which is projected to increase to 75

percent by 2030. This will further heighten uncertainty in energy security. However, despite this looming crisis, all charges are being increased unreasonably.

In 2023, after gaining the authority to set price rates, the previous government increased gas prices manyfold—including for production, transmission, and distribution charges. The charges for Petrobangla and Rupantarita Prakriti Gas Company Limited were also increased unnecessarily. The gas price was raised for large, medium, small, and cottage industries as well. For captive power, the price was increased by 97 percent, and for electricity, it was raised by 209 percent. The current government raised the price of gas used in industrial and captive power generation too. This indicates that the previous government not only turned the country into a power and energy import market but also moved towards turning it

strategically created the groundwork for increased LNG imports. Looks like the current government is moving towards the same direction.

The previous government initiated large-scale megaprojects for solar power development through private sector investments without competition. According to the Power Purchase Agreements (PPAs), the electricity price for these projects was around Tk 14 per unit, even though solar power could be produced for less than Tk 4.5 per unit. The current government has cancelled these initiatives and called for competitive investments instead. However, due to the lack of capacity of the Power Division, there is uncertainty about electricity price decline to a fair and reasonable level. To develop this sector, it is necessary to enhance and empower Sustainable and Renewable Energy Development Authority (SREDA) to ensure stakeholder participation under BERC, and limit the involvement of the Power Division. Additionally, a bottom-up approach should be adopted to promote this sector as a small and cottage industry, encouraging the creation of domestic entrepreneurs.

Due to the Electricity and Energy Speedy Supply (Special Provisions) Act, 2010, which allowed non-competitive investments, the development of the power and energy sector led to increased predatory costs. In 2023, an

rights of citizens. The approval of the recent price hike proposal by the ministry and its acceptance by BERC demonstrate that there has been no improvement in the situation.

The current government repealed the Special Provisions Act, 2010, as well as Section 34A of the BERC Act. However, the provision that states, "Until the commission formulates regulations, the government may, by notification in the official gazette, determine,

government has provided an opportunity, and people should find solutions to their problems. Consequently, consumers demand that—(a) The proposal to increase the gas tariff for industrial and captive power use by 75.72 percent, as presented in the hearing, must be dismissed immediately. (b) All tariff-related orders issued by the Ministry of Power, Energy, and Mineral Resources under Section 34A of the amended BERC Act must



FILE VISUAL: TEENI AND TUNI

re-determine, or adjust tariffs," is yet to be repealed. The ministry thus has continued to set the tariff of liquid fuels. Sections 2(b) and 2(c) were added in the ordinance, effectively granting immunity to the wrongful and criminal activities carried out under the previous law. This betrayed the people, making them victims of a new cycle of exploitation.

Energy security cannot be guaranteed unless electricity and primary energy are made accessible at prices within consumers' purchasing power. This necessitates a comprehensive reform of the energy sector, which must be carried out by BERC with the participation and empowerment of stakeholders. To achieve this, the Ministry of Power, Energy, and Mineral Resources must be rendered inactive. During the hearing, concerns were raised that the public appeal should not escalate into a mass movement. The chief adviser acknowledged that the

be revoked. Additionally, liquid fuel prices should be determined solely through public hearings conducted by BERC. (c) The total amount of predatory costs incorporated into electricity and primary energy pricing under the previous government must be identified. Existing tariffs must then be adjusted by removing these unjustified and predatory costs and lowering government revenue, ensuring a fair price for all consumers. (d) A tribunal, led by a retired Supreme Court judge, must be formed to bring energy criminals to justice and ensure accountability. (e) The BERC Act must be reformed to establish a legal framework that ensures fair energy distribution and protects consumers from predatory practices. (f) To ensure affordable access to electricity and primary energy, the sector must undergo structural reform under a BERC supervised commission comprising stakeholder representatives.

The 'bhodroshomaj' that is killing women and girls



Shahana Siddiqui, PhD, is medical anthropologist at Universiteit van Amsterdam.

SHAHANA SIDDIQUI

The Egyptian Arab Spring began with demonstrations across the country, participated by working-class youths, including women who voiced out against sexual violence and harassment, connecting the culture of impunity to Hosni Mubarak's dictatorship. Yet, in real time, we witnessed the hijacking of the entire movement by the religious right. Seeing the July-August movement, an Egyptian friend who was part of the Arab Spring, disillusioned but sincere, hoped that the same would not happen in Bangladesh. Even with my own optimism, I had told him that we had been an Iranian Revolution in the making for a long time—but yes, time would tell.

Not much time was needed for the story to unfold. We are a "wonderful" mix of the Iranian Revolution and Arab Spring—where class, religion, and national politics are played out on women's and female children's bodies. The battle for women's basic safety and dignity, fought on the streets, is not a momentary reaction but a litmus test for Bangladesh's national outlook for decades to come.

From the neighbourhood bully "uncle" allegedly assaulting a young woman for publicly smoking, to gang rapes across the country; from *tawhidjanata* demanding the release of a harasser, to the death of an eight-year-old girl who succumbed to her injuries after being allegedly gang raped by her male family members—there seems to be no safe corner left for Bangladesh's women. After a week of convoluted and factually incorrect statements by the home affairs adviser, met with fierce protests, the interim government finally initiated steps to arrest the alleged perpetrators. It is disappointing, to say the least, to witness the sluggish response of a cabinet comprising members who built their careers on "women's empowerment." There is greater fervour in finding "fascists," shifting blame onto the previous government's failures than in addressing today's gendered horrors. The AL government often blamed everything on the BNP and the general "anti-Ekattor or *chetona/razakars*." The blame-game narrative remains unchanged.

An excellent body of work has emerged on the culture of misogyny and impunity, in the face of growing religious conservatism. However, an important piece of the puzzle is still missing from these analyses: why, globally, Bangladesh continues to be one of the most unsafe countries for women when its national success was achieved on women's backs. I would, therefore, argue for a critical

class analysis of gender and violence, which is often simplified as a rights and development issue or reduced to a general description of shame/honour culture. Critical class analysis is understood in Bangladesh's academia, yet class struggle lies at the core of gender-politics violence.

Returning to Iran and Egypt, we saw how, as a reaction against the morally and financially corrupt autocratic regimes, religious conservatism rose within the middle and lower-middle income groups. Along with financial corruption, autocrats concentrate power through fearmongering and social gatekeeping, preventing socio-economic mobility and leading to class tensions. In such contexts, controlling women's bodies and sexuality becomes pivotal to class struggle, which is usually watered down as a mere progressive vs fundamentalist dichotomy.

Partha Chatterjee's critique of the "bhodrolokhomaj"—the respectability class of Bengal Renaissance—argued for Indian sovereignty on two important points: (a) the scientific prowess of the "native" educated elite, at par with their British colonisers; and (b) the Indian moral superiority, embodied in the propriety and spirituality of Indian women (Chatterjee, 1994). The mark of modernity was to pursue scientific knowledge, including the "allowance" of women's education, while ensuring their spiritual and physical virtue (e.g. Begum Rokeya Shakhawat Hossain, the women of the Tagore household). When it came to practices of gendered propriety—*zenana/purdah*, marriage as the sole option for women, Sita-esque purity imposition—Hindu and Muslim men were united (Hoek, 2013; Lal, 2005).

Indian feminists have shown that South Asia's decolonial movement was primarily an exchange of power between colonial and elite native men, leaving the subaltern—mainly women and lower-caste-class groups—out of the board. Young people, for instance, aspire to achieve class mobility through education, employment and marriage. Across class divisions, marriage still remains significantly important as men attain "manhood" status and women uphold familial status through it. In a society where marriage is the only socially acceptable rite of passage for women, virginity or its perception is a powerful social capital to attain class and respectability (hence high child marriage rates) (Siddiqui, 2005; Siddiqui, 2024). From professional women's rights work to supporting divorcees, I can firmly state that it is a common misconception that only economically disenfranchised women stay in violent marriages. In fact, the middle class and above prolong unhealthy marriages

the infamous two-finger/virginity test, which, despite being repealed (2014) and banned (2018) by the High Court (Hossain, 2016; Huda, 2022), is still practised in medico-legal examinations (Siddiqui, 2024). Although the colonial penal system has been reformed, it lacks a fundamental overhaul to ensure restorative justice. Even the special law *Nari O Shishu Nirjatan Daman Ain*, 2000, focuses on protecting women's honour to prevent

("biye tikano") for fear of losing social and economic status, allowing male violence and questionable behaviours to continue.

Irrespective of gender, I found service providers quite conservative, often letting personal beliefs influence professional duties. These providers—police, doctors, junior-mid-level government officers, lawyers, NGO workers—are usually first-generation urban residents, part of the "new" middle class,



FILE VISUAL: KAZI TAHSIN AGAZ APURBO

violence. Research shows that this law is often abused, and in authentic cases, the system fails survivors (Ibid).

Having conducted ethnographic research on the medico-legal procedures of sexual violence in Bangladesh, I frequently encountered the intersection of class and propriety across the board. Young people, for instance, aspire to achieve class mobility through education, employment and marriage. Across class divisions, marriage still remains significantly important as men attain "manhood" status and women uphold familial status through it. In a society where marriage is the only socially acceptable rite of passage for women, virginity or its perception is a powerful social capital to attain class and respectability (hence high child marriage rates) (Siddiqui, 2005; Siddiqui, 2024). From professional women's rights work to supporting divorcees, I can firmly state that it is a common misconception that only economically disenfranchised women stay in violent marriages. In fact, the middle class and above prolong unhealthy marriages

from across Bangladesh. The majority of this group received public or madrasa education, surrounded by a Middle East remittance-driven socio-cultural environment. Religious is both a matter of spirituality and strategic social capital building for them, often feeling justified in morally policing others. For example, similar to female garment workers adopting *purdah* as survival strategy (Kabeer, 1994), middle-class women adopting *hijab* practices to access higher education and "respectable" jobs (Huq, 2021).

The stakeholders, on the other hand, were part of the "old" middle class which is more of a social status than an economic marker. The elite minority is usually a complex mix of the upper-middle class with the ultra-rich, related by blood or marriage. Religion is also used by many in this category to "socially whiten" financial corruption. Given their power-coopted position, they tend to generalise religious others with colonial, racist undertones, showing little understanding of dynamics outside. The elite class frames

women's rights as a development problem rather than a crisis of citizenship. The donor-driven development sector—with "patchwork developmentalism"—has turned women into apolitical categories—"poor/vulnerable," "RMG workers," "youth," and "victims"—marred with paternalistic language and band-aid solutions.

As one of the posters from the recent protests rightfully stated, women are citizens/vote banks only during elections. The rest of the time, they are "cheap" emotional and industrial labour that keep the home and national economies running. The result of both—the conservative economic middle class and the progressive (classist) elites—is the perpetuation of structural violence through familial and state systems.

In the absence of critical discourse on marriage-class sexuality, patriarchal relations, i.e. kinship, to a man remain the primary option for accessing resources for women. Men have no incentive to question or destabilise their own power hierarchies and women are co-opted into violent structures. This is why known sex offenders and assaulters, without facing any consequences, continue to be celebrated for the respective positions they hold in society. This is why we use passive terms such as "violence against women" or "gender-based violence" rather than the active voice: "men assaulting women," or "men raping girls." This is why madrasa teachers can hide behind "but the devil made me do it" narratives, gaining sympathy from their peers. This is what delays policymakers in taking immediate actions and prioritising the issue as a national crisis. This is also why women across class divide perpetuate violent kinship structures, protect the men in their lives, and morally police one another.

Socio-cultural and political realms of Bangladesh do not view women as viable, political, active citizens who deserve not just rights, but the dignity to live our lives on our own terms. The male protestors of the anti-discrimination student movement welcomed their female peers when they stood as shields before them. Like all things with women in Bangladesh, once their presence was utilised fully, they were pushed to the sideline.

Undoubtedly, there has been an unprecedented rise in male violence against women but the patriarchal culture of impunity, and undermining women as anything other than industrial or reproductive labour, is also nothing new. The "bhodroshomaj" has been killing us for a long time. As long as we continue to function within Victorian patriarchal political and legal structures that, by design, are to ensure male domination, we will remain as subjects, not citizens, in our own country.

The question is: do we keep taking to the street every time a gruesome rape happens and settle with little band-aid solutions, or do we rip it all apart and demand a social upheaval where women are no longer apolitical categories but political citizens with dignity?