

Reform power sector to reduce subsidy

Govt must prioritise increasing efficiency, cutting costs

The interim government's move to increase power and fertiliser subsidies in the revised FY25 budget by 57.9 percent highlights, once again, the prevailing mess in the power sector. There had been increases in subsidies during Awami League's tenure too, most of which ended up lining the pockets of vested interest groups and eventually increasing the debt burden of the nation. The interim government seems to be following the same prescription, albeit for different reasons. Reportedly, it is looking to increase the power subsidy to Tk 62,000 crore (a 55 percent rise) and the fertiliser subsidy to Tk 28,000 crore (a 64.7 percent rise).

A report by this daily quoted a finance ministry official who explained that the power subsidy increase is being considered so as not to raise power prices during this time of high inflation and to pay off the huge arrears carried over from the previous regime. While we appreciate that the authorities took into account consumers' interests and refrained from increasing prices, they could have, for our long-term benefits, taken measures to address the institutional inefficiency of the sector that are draining resources. It is estimated that as much as Tk 11,444 crore could have been saved by reducing power production costs by 10 percent, which in turn could have kept the subsidy in control.

In fact, a recent study by the Institute for Energy Economics and Financial Analysis (IEEFA) found that the Bangladesh Power Development Board (BPDB) can save Tk 13,800 crore annually—a loss currently covered by government subsidy—just by fixing some core problems. Its recommendations included shifting half of the existing industrial demand to the grid, which is currently met by captive generators, and adding 3,000 megawatts (MW) of renewables, reducing load-shedding, as well as limiting transmission and distribution losses.

During Hasina's tenure, 81 percent of the power subsidy—Tk 39,406 crore in the revised budget for FY2023-24—was spent on the rented power plants to pay for capacity charges, even when those plants were sitting idle. It is time to critically revisit the collusive deals of the last regime and reduce reliance on rental power plants. According to IEEFA, transitioning to electric systems from gas driven appliances, like boilers, will help increase BPDB's revenue from selling additional energy while reducing capacity payments to idle plants.

The arrears left by the previous regime may take time to repay, but the interim government should take prudent measures to rectify the situation. Every effort must be made to ensure that the nation is not burdened with additional debt. We can no longer afford inefficiency in the power sector or allow it to run without accountability.

Bangladesh Railway must tighten its belt

Another case of wasteful spending shows need for corrective action

In yet another exposé of corrupt practices under the Awami League government, it has been revealed that Bangladesh Railway spent about Tk 38 crore on two automated train washing plants in 2021, only for them to become nonfunctional within just 20 months. During this time, the plants managed to clean 2,929 trains. Considering the total expenditure on their procurement and installation, it means that each wash cost the government about Tk 1.3 lakh, which is quite unthinkable. For context, only Tk 1,000 or so would have been required for a manual wash. This case, reported by Prothom Alo, serves as a glaring example of how government projects were often wasteful, mismanaged, and riddled with questionable procurement decisions.

The automated washing plants, purchased as part of a railway coach procurement project, were meant to modernise train cleaning by saving time and minimising water consumption. Instead, they turned out to be an overpriced failure. Not only did they cease to function in less than two years, but even when operational, they failed to clean train interiors, including toilets, requiring manual labour afterward. The entire endeavour reeks of a plan designed more for inflating project costs and lining the pockets of those involved than for serving the public.

Unfortunately, the railway sector was plagued by such corruption and mismanagement throughout the 15-plus years of Awami League's rule. And unnecessary procurement or excessive spending using various excuses was the hallmark of such ill-conceived projects. For instance, three officials visited the US apparently to "see the effectiveness" of the automated washing plants, one of them retiring soon after the purchase. As part of various projects, four tamping machines—used in track repairs—were also purchased, each at a cost of Tk 15-30 crore. These machines are now mostly non-functional. The plight of the DEMU trains imported from China is also well-known. There have been many such procurements and expenditures that were not needed, or carefully thought through, but were green-lighted anyway only to fulfil the wishes of politically-backed contractors and railway officials, who hardly ever faced justice for such corruption.

This must change. A country with scarce resources cannot afford to waste billions on dysfunctional projects while essential public services struggle for funding. We urge the authorities to conduct a thorough investigation into the washing plant fiasco and other such failed initiatives, and hold to account those behind them. Bangladesh Railway, and by extension all public offices, must ensure that all projects and procurements follow strict cost-benefit analyses, and that they are utilised properly to serve the public.

THIS DAY IN HISTORY

South Africans vote to end apartheid

On this day in 1992, nearly 69 percent of White South African voters backed F.W. de Klerk's reforms—which included the repeal of racially discriminatory laws—and effectively endorsed the dismantling of apartheid.



What's impeding the reforms in Bangladesh?



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Continuous reform is vital for sustainable progress. Over the years, Bangladesh, a developing economy, has struggled to implement necessary economic, political, administrative, judicial and social reforms. While significant economic reforms in the 1980s and early 1990s laid the groundwork for a market-oriented economy, major structural reforms have stalled since then. In contrast, Southeast Asian countries like Vietnam have achieved remarkable progress through continuous reform, such as the 1986 "Doi Moi" policy, which boosted productivity, investment, and trade.

Economic reforms in the 1980s and 1990s spurred private sector growth and investment, but recent stagnation in domestic and foreign investment, banking sector weaknesses, and limited tax collection highlight the need for structural changes in banking, revenue systems, and trade policies.

Political reform is vital for democratic development, electoral transparency, and internal party democracy, but corruption and political reluctance hinder progress. Without it, good governance and sectoral reforms remain challenging. Administrative reform is key to improving bureaucratic efficiency, transparency, and accountability. Digitalising operations and reducing complexities can make governance more citizen-friendly.

Judicial reform is necessary to address delays, backlog, and corruption, ensuring swift justice and judicial independence to restore public trust. Social reform, including education, healthcare, labour market improvements, poverty alleviation, and the empowerment of women and marginalised groups, is fundamental for inclusive growth. Comprehensive reforms across these sectors are imperative for Bangladesh's long-term progress.

Why reform is difficult in Bangladesh

Implementing the desired reforms in

Bangladesh is particularly challenging due to the complexities of political and social realities. Reluctance of the major political parties, influence of vested interest groups, and weak demand for reform from society play crucial roles in obstructing reform efforts. Although policy reform initiatives have been undertaken in the country at various times, their structural and effective implementation have not taken place. The existing political culture and

changes.

Another major reason for the stagnation of the reform process is the influence of vested interest groups. Political and business elites, along with bureaucratic opponents of reform, benefit from the current system and resist change. These groups actively work against reform efforts to preserve their privileges. For instance, attempts to increase transparency and accountability in the banking and taxation sectors face resistance from influential individuals, as such reforms could limit their irregular financial activities and special benefits. Similarly, efforts to reform tariff policies, government subsidies, and procurement processes are often obstructed by powerful groups using their political and administrative influence.

Public opinion and societal demand



FILE VISUAL: ANWAR SOHEL

the centralised nature of power are significant barriers to reform.

The lack of internal democracy within major political parties prevents them from being genuinely interested in implementing democratic and governance reforms at the national level. Party leaders' dominance, hereditary leadership, and irregular decision-making processes hinder political reform. Furthermore, elite groups benefiting from the existing system oppose reform. Political parties often promise reforms while in power, but fail to take concrete steps for implementation. Meanwhile, when in opposition, they use reform demands as a political strategy, which they do not follow through once in power. As a result, there is a clear lack of political will for long-term structural

for reform are also relatively weak in Bangladesh. A strong societal demand for reform has not yet been well-organised, which reduces pressure on the government and policymakers to initiate change. Although there is public dissatisfaction with corruption, inefficiency, and a lack of transparency in various sectors, this sentiment has not been mobilised into a collective movement. The active role of the media, civil society, and educated citizens is crucial in this process. However, their efforts have so far failed to exert sufficient pressure on policymakers for reform.

Given the lack of strong internal pressure for reform, much of the impetus for past reforms has come from external actors such as international development organisations and

Pain, bleeding and helplessness Living with fibroids and cysts



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The world as we know it is full of inequalities. Some are more detrimental than others, like the glaring inequity in the research fields of women's and men's health.

Medical treatment is a basic need and women are different from men in many ways, including physiologically. Women's cardiovascular health, hormonal balance, mental health, musculoskeletal health, immune system, metabolism, and last but not least, reproductive health, are different from those of men. For instance, with heart attacks, the most common symptom in both men and women is chest pain. However, women are often more likely to experience other symptoms, such as shortness of breath, nausea or vomiting, or jaw pain. Women and men also metabolise and respond to many drugs differently. There are also gender-based variations in the physiological mechanisms underlying pain.

However, even though women make up close to 50 percent of the world's population, there is a glaring lack of research on their health.

This historical focus on the "default" male body sidelines conditions predominantly affecting women such as uterine fibroids—non-cancerous growths on or in the uterus, and ovarian cysts—sacs filled with fluid that form on or inside an ovary. Is this oversight just a scientific failure? No,

it is also a social injustice with deep, multifaceted implications.

Some claim that an estimated 171 million women worldwide have uterine fibroids. Another source indicates global prevalence has increased from 126.41 to 226.05 million cases in recent decades.

On the other hand, an ovarian cyst is a widespread phenomenon in women of reproductive age. Among the people I know closely, seven women are combating this problem in various stages. The number will be eight if I count myself. So, even though I failed to collect information on the number of cases worldwide, again due to the lack of research in this area, I know that the number is very high.

These conditions hamper the quality of life with their debilitating symptoms—painful periods, heavy and inconsistent bleeding, unmanageable cramps, chronic pelvic pain, bloating and swelling, back and leg pain, constipation and diarrhoea, anaemia, etc. Along with these, stress and feelings of helplessness stem from lack of options.

So, who develops cysts and fibroids and why? Can they be prevented? You guessed the answer correctly. We do not know what leads to the development of these unwanted growths, nor is there any prevention. To date, no long-term or non-invasive treatment option exists for uterine

fibroids or pathological ovarian cysts. All you can do is be vigilant and regularly visit your sonographer and gynaecologist, hoping to catch them early so you don't need to go to the operating table.

The consequences of this imbalance in the medical research sector are stark. Without sufficient research, the pathogenesis and preventive strategies for these common yet debilitating conditions remain poorly understood, resulting in women suffering through cycles of pain, fertility issues, and diminished quality of life.

The lack of preventive measures for fibroids and ovarian cysts means that treatment is reactive rather than proactive—addressing symptoms after significant damage has been done. This reactive approach not only burdens the healthcare system but also places an emotional and physical toll on millions of women, whose reproductive health is sidelined in favour of conditions deemed more "urgent" or "universal."

The situation is even more pronounced in the Indian subcontinent, where patriarchal norms and socio-cultural taboos further hinder open discussions about women's health.

Bangladesh faces unique challenges: a high population density, widespread poverty, and a healthcare system stretched thin by infectious diseases and maternal health emergencies. These pressing concerns, while critical, have often crowded out the nuanced research and measures needed for chronic conditions like fibroids and ovarian cysts. Moreover, the stigma attached to discussing menstrual irregularities or pelvic pain further discourages women from seeking medical advice until conditions have advanced, thereby complicating treatment and outcomes.

Establishing powerful genetic labs in Bangladesh is one of the steps required to address the lack of research in the medical sector, including in women's health, she said. There are only a few such labs in the country—that too in private capacity, she added.

Research about ovarian cysts and fibroids is at the intersection of healthcare equity. More research and better treatment are also necessary for society and the economy. Ovarian cysts and fibroids cost women, their families, and businesses hundreds of thousands in lost work hours and medical procedures.

Obstetrician-gynaecologist (OB-GYN) Dr Ferdousi Begum, a professor of the Bangladesh Institute of Research and Rehabilitation in Diabetes, Endocrine and Metabolic Disorders (BIRDEM) Hospital, said that there has only been sporadic and small-scale research in this area in Bangladesh, which is not nearly enough.

In developing countries, including Bangladesh, funding for research on women's health is much less in proportion to other fields, she said, adding that more research in the area can assist doctors in helping the patients in newer ways.

Women's reproductive health is still a taboo in many households. Fibroids and cysts are often diagnosed late when the only available treatment left is surgery, she said.

Pain and excessive bleeding during periods should not be ignored as these can be symptoms of cysts and fibroids, the OB-GYN said. In case of recurrent fibroids, which is fairly common, doctors sometimes suggest removing the uterus. However, this option is not for those who want to conceive. However, fibroids and cysts (which are also likely to recur) may cause infertility as well.

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