

Rebuilding trust in global trade

The case for multilateralism in the Trump era



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The global trading system, anchored by multilateralism and predictability for decades, has entered a phase of profound uncertainty. This crisis was hastened by the aggressive protectionist measures pursued under the administration of US President Donald Trump, which inflicted lasting damage on institutions such as the World Trade Organization (WTO) and undermined long-standing norms like non-discrimination and reciprocity. For developing countries and Least Developed Countries (LDCs), such as Bangladesh, the weakening of multilateral trade architecture presents deep structural challenges that threaten both economic security and development progress.

Trade liberalisation has been one of the defining achievements in the post-World War II era. Under the General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade (GATT) and later the WTO, countries committed to progressively reduce tariffs and remove trade barriers. Principles such as the most-favoured-nation (MFN) treatment and national treatment underpinned this cooperation, ensuring that countries treated all trade partners equally and foreign products no less favourably than domestic ones.

However, the Trump administration's unilateral tariffs on steel, aluminium, and Chinese goods marked a sharp departure, bypassing WTO mechanisms and challenging these foundational norms. Justified on national security grounds, the measures fuelled retaliatory responses and signalled a shift from multilateralism to power-driven bilateralism, disrupting global supply chains and undermining rule-based trade. The

implications have been global in scope, with spillover effects that have rippled across borders and disrupted integrated supply chains.

Bangladesh's export-led economy, particularly its \$40 billion ready-made garment (RMG) sector, has long benefited from multilateral trade rules and preferential schemes such as the Generalised System of Preferences (GSP). However, the recent wave of protectionism and unilateral tariffs exemplified by Trump's policies poses serious risks. Even if no direct tariffs on Bangladeshi goods were imposed, the country would still be vulnerable due to its deep integration in global value chains. For example, if Bangladesh exports fabric to a country assembling garments for the US, American tariffs on those final products can sharply reduce demand for Bangladeshi inputs. This exposure is heightened by the paralysis of the WTO dispute settlement system, leaving Bangladesh without effective legal recourse. Additionally, tariff escalation, where processed goods face higher duties than raw materials, discourages industrial upgrading and hinders diversification beyond low-skill manufacturing, limiting Bangladesh's ability to climb the value chain and sustain long-term development.

Trade is not only an economic tool; it is central to the realisation of sustainable development and the maintenance of global peace and security. The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development underscores the transformative potential of trade in achieving the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). Specifically, trade contributes to SDG 1 (No

Poverty), SDG 2 (Zero Hunger), SDG 5 (Gender Equality), SDG 8 (Decent Work and Economic Growth), SDG 9 (Industry, Innovation, and Infrastructure), and SDG 10 (Reduced Inequalities).

Bangladesh's developmental success has been intricately tied to export-led growth. The disruption of multilateral trade norms and institutions, therefore, puts these hard-won gains at risk. Furthermore, there is a growing

threatening peace and stability at the national and international levels. As trade disruptions deepen disparities, the prospects for global peace and cooperation diminish. Reinvigorating the multilateral trading system is thus not only about promoting commerce, but also about creating the conditions for durable peace.

The path forward must involve a reinvigoration of multilateralism. WTO

in international trade.

In parallel, the trade agenda must better integrate development priorities. Special and differential treatment for LDCs should be preserved and enhanced. This includes not just preferential tariffs, but also capacity-building, technical assistance, and flexible transition periods, especially for countries like Bangladesh that are on the cusp of LDC graduation.

Bangladesh must also adopt a forward-looking trade strategy that reduces overdependence on traditional markets. Regional cooperation through frameworks like the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP), Bay of Bengal Initiative for Multi-Sectoral Technical and Economic Cooperation (BIMSTEC), and the South Asian Free Trade Area (SAFTA) could offer alternative avenues for market expansion.

Domestic reforms are equally crucial. Enhancing product quality standards, addressing non-tariff barriers, modernising customs procedures, and improving logistical infrastructure will make Bangladeshi exports more competitive. Furthermore, by investing in education and innovation, the country can develop the human capital needed for higher-value industries.

Finally, as a soon-to-graduate LDC, Bangladesh should play a proactive role in WTO negotiations. It should align with other developing nations to push for inclusive reforms that prioritise development over domination.

Trump's tariff policies exposed the fragility of the multilateral trading system, revealing how quickly established norms can be cast aside. But they also highlighted the enduring relevance of multilateralism as a safeguard for smaller and less powerful countries. For Bangladesh, the stakes are not abstract; they involve livelihoods, national development, and economic sovereignty.

The future of sustainable development and global peace depends on restoring trust in fair and equitable trade. Trade must be reclaimed not merely as a tool of economic exchange but as a foundation for a more just, prosperous, and peaceful world.



Regional cooperation through frameworks like the RCEP, BIMSTEC, and SAFTA could offer alternative avenues of market expansion for Bangladeshi products. PHOTO: PTI

consensus that sustainable development cannot thrive in an environment of trade unpredictability and economic nationalism. When markets close, global supply chains fracture, and LDCs lose access to opportunities for growth and diversification. The ripple effects are not limited to economic indicators; they affect food security, public health systems, education, and social cohesion.

In addition, economic marginalisation and systemic inequality fuel social unrest, extremism, and forced migration,

reform, particularly the restoration of its dispute settlement mechanism, is essential. Countries should work to depoliticise appointments to the Appellate Body and ensure that future trade disagreements can be resolved through law rather than power.

Reaffirming the principles of MFN and national treatment must also be a priority. The widespread disregard for these norms has allowed powerful states to extract concessions through bilateralism, often at the expense of smaller economies. Restoring these rules will be critical to re-establishing trust and fairness

The pervasive curse of toxic masculinity



BLOWIN' IN THE WIND

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SHAMSAD MORTUZA

It all started with a subtle protest. A young man in his mid-20s was staring at a woman standing at a juice joint near her home. Her younger brother and a friend were with her when the woman noticed the man's constant staring at her. "Do I know you? Why are you looking at me?" was a hint for the man to leave them alone. Instead, the man retorted by asking, "What's wrong with staring?"

I read journalist Rafia Tamanna's account of the incident on social media, where she detailed how she and her brother were physically attacked and threatened by the man and his friends. Thanks to rapid police action, the attackers have been apprehended. However, I am intrigued by the apparently innocent question, "What's wrong with staring?" Surely, looks don't kill. We were not there to determine whether the gaze was flirtatious or toxic. But in any culture, prolonged staring is considered an invasion of privacy, a form of intimidation and aggression. Averted eye contact is perceived as a sign of modesty, especially when you are engaging with elders or the opposite gender. When you make eye contact with a stranger in public, the expected norm is to nod or smile to acknowledge the person and look away. Decency would have demanded the man feel slightly embarrassed and return to his own business after Rafia raised her discomfort. His resort to violence, assisted by his friends, signals a disturbingly common mindset that normalises the objectification of women and frames protest against such behaviour as transgression.

According to this mindset, out in the open, men have the right to look at any woman. If one wants to spare oneself from such stares, one is prescribed to wear veils. Otherwise, men reserve the right to treat women as "public property." They reserve the right to be oblivious to a woman's discomfort by defining such "staring"

not as harassment but as harmless. Heaven forbid, if a woman protests, men will rewrite the moral script to blame the woman as the aggressor for her reaction. Such audacity will be met by public punishment, boosting male ego.

The real issue here is power and control over women's bodies and space. Even when a woman is escorted by a male in public, she is not safe. Think of the attack on a mother in

of sexual harassment, we find the majority of our men rally to scandalise the victim. Digital smearing, or slut-shaming for clothes or progressive outlook, is on the rise to suggest how toxic masculinity feeds on collective denial and hostility. It serves as a tool to silence women. Thankfully, Rafia did not remain silent. She posted a photo of herself in the dress she was wearing to write, "If I can join the street protests in July knowing that the next bullet could have hit me, I might as well wait for the next slur."

I am sure many will interpret the gesture as a further provocation. Many will tighten their grips on the moral whips and lash at her with hormonal fury. Arresting three men is like a band-aid offered to a patient with internal haemorrhage. A new case will emerge to divert our attention.

Already, we have forgotten the

minister whether his government was planning to use the Netflix miniseries *Adolescence* as an education tool to address toxic masculinity. I ended up watching the series featuring Jamie, a 13-year-old boy accused of murdering his classmate. As the plot unfolds, we realise how young boys today are exposed to extreme misogynistic content online. The frustration of a young boy to have a romantic relationship with a girl of his age is blamed on the supposed fact that 80 percent of the girls are attracted to 20 percent of the boys. This misunderstanding leads to the rise of incel (involuntary celibate) culture, where the male blames the women, and by extension society, for their lack of romantic success. By focusing on Jamie's journey, the series examines how his father's macho image, the school bullies, and the absence of a female voice in the household contributed to his radicalisation. The underlying message of the series involves early intervention and open conversations about masculinity, mental health, and the influence of digital environments on youth development.

Could we not adopt a similar approach to our school curriculum? For a second, let's reverse the gaze and try to answer what was wrong with the staring that led to the assault of Rafia. Do you think, at the back of his mind, the perpetrator, like Jamie, felt jealous of two boys having glasses of juice in his locality? Who did he blame: his misfortune, his social status, or his upbringing? The 80/20 rule robs him of "human" relationships. So, when confronted, he decided to tap into his primitive energy to be a "man." He "manned up" to show the woman her "place" in society. As long as we men do not learn to become humans, we will have such issues in society.

Covering up the other in veils is not a solution. We need to create open space to discuss why men desire to be the masters and controllers of everything and everyone. Through this process of open dialogue, both the old and the young can start learning together about the evils of toxic masculinity.



VISUAL: SHAIKH SULTANA JAHAN BADHON

front of her teenage son following an altercation with a street vendor in Mirpur. These are textbook cases of toxic masculinity. The salesman could not allow a woman to slight him in public. He beat up a middle-aged woman, old enough to be his mother, to assert that he is man enough to "teach the woman her proper place in society."

The anger with which women are confronted is not an isolated incident. A cultural virus has deeply rooted itself in our society, causing this rage. The anger is cultured and nurtured by patriarchy. Hence, after every instance

brutal rape and murder of the eight-year-old girl visiting her sister's in-laws in Magura. The entire country erupted into protest, irrespective of party banners. The promise was to amend existing laws. And we returned to our Eid specials with a feeling of wonderful accomplishment. The shelf life of a sensational news story is the wait period before the arrival of the next one.

However, in advanced societies, they always find time to rethink these more profound issues. It occurred to me while watching a British parliamentarian asking the prime

CROSSWORD BY THOMAS JOSEPH

ACROSS

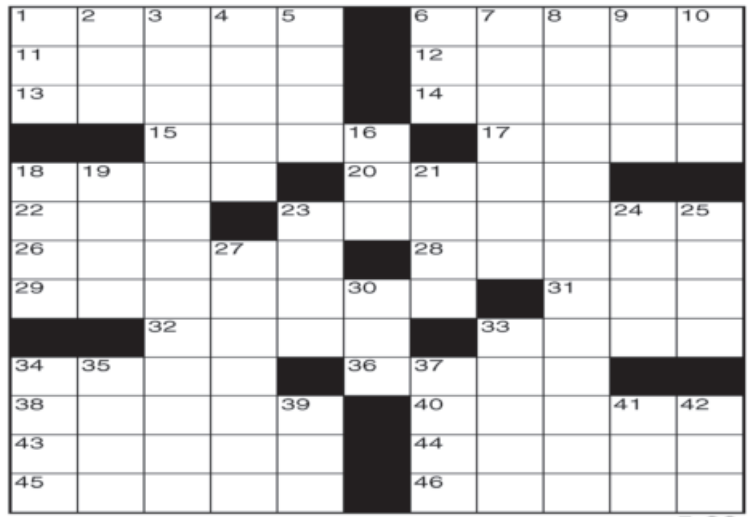
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- 30 USN rank
- 33 Lets up
- 34 Skating group
- 35 Emmy winner Alan
- 37 Mountain lion
- 39 Raised trains
- 41 Verb for you
- 42 — Angeles



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