

Bangladesh deserves better leaders. How do we find them?



Kollof Kibria is an advocate, human rights activist, and political analyst. He can be reached at kollofkibria@gmail.com.

KALLOL KIBRIA

Something shifted in the air after the recent Bangladesh Investment Summit. The conversations were ambitious, the energy palpable. But what stood out most wasn't a policy announcement or a foreign pledge—it was a silent, growing consensus about the kind of leadership this country truly needs to move forward.

For the first time in a long time, it felt like the room was full of possibility not just because of capital or contracts, but because of people. We witnessed a different calibre of leadership—individuals who were confident without being arrogant, educated without being elitist, and globally fluent without losing their connection to the land they came from. And perhaps for the first time in decades, Bangladeshis collectively began to see what our politics could look like if the right people were given the platform to lead.

That's when something quietly but powerfully emerged—a new paradigm of leadership. Let's call it "the Ashik Chowdhury paradigm."

Now, this isn't about one man or one speech. It's a symbol. A representation of a deeper national yearning. It reflects a growing impatience among the people—especially the youth—with the old ways of doing politics. Bangladeshis are no longer interested in leaders chosen solely because of dynastic ties, blind party loyalty, or how loudly they can cheer during parliamentary sessions. They are asking harder questions like: who really speaks for us? Who is equipped to take our voices to Geneva, to New York, to regional trade summits and global climate tables?

We are no longer a country defined only by its past. We are one of the fastest-growing economies in South Asia. We are building expressways, launching satellites, exporting digital services. Yet, our politics still feels trapped in the 1980s—a theatre of loyalty contests and generational entitlements. Something doesn't add up.

The truth is, we need new blood. And not just young blood, but fresh blood. Educated, ethical, globally aware, and deeply rooted in the everyday realities of ordinary Bangladeshis. We need leaders who understand policy, who speak truth with compassion, and who can transition seamlessly from a village gathering in Gaibandha to a high-level forum in Brussels. That standard is not impossible. We have seen glimpses of it. And once you see it, you can't unsee it.

There is no lack of qualified people in this country. We have young lawyers, doctors, academics, economists, climate scientists, and tech innovators—many of whom are already contributing to national development in significant ways. The private sector has embraced these talents. So has civil society. Even international organisations have begun hiring Bangladeshi professionals at senior levels. Yet, our political institutions remain largely closed off to them.

Our challenges are more complex: climate resilience, digital governance, geopolitical alignment, inclusive urbanisation, youth employment, gender justice. These require leaders who not only understand policy, but also understand the world.

To navigate these new realities, we need leaders who are neither afraid of intellect nor threatened by questions. We need leaders who don't see fluency in English as elitism, but as a necessary tool for diplomacy and international negotiation. Parliament must be a house of ideas, not applause; of serious scrutiny, not performative loyalty.

There's a strange discomfort in our political culture with the word "education," as if being educated somehow makes one disconnected or "foreign." But what is politics if not the most complex, demanding job of all? If we expect qualifications from our engineers, teachers, and doctors, why not from our lawmakers?

An MP is not just a local powerbroker. They are legislators. They pass laws that affect 170

keep winging it.

Education is not about English fluency or fancy degrees. It's about critical thinking, problem-solving, and the ability to understand complexity. It's about integrity, perspective, and the discipline to listen and learn. We must stop framing educated leadership as a threat to grassroots connection. The two are not mutually exclusive—they are necessary complements.

One of the more insidious problems in Bangladeshi politics is the entrenchment of dynastic control. Political legacies are passed down like family heirlooms, not earned through merit or public service. This not only blocks fresh talent—it fosters a dangerous sense of entitlement among political heirs.

Of course, political experience within families isn't inherently bad. Many sons and daughters of political leaders grow up understanding governance deeply. But when bloodline becomes the only qualification, it signals decay. It tells young people that unless

the role. They should rise through public trust, competence, and clarity of vision. The future of this country depends on that shift.

One of the most tragic ironies of our political structure is that we have a functioning parliamentary democracy on paper, but not in practice. Parliament should be a sacred space of disagreement, dialogue, and lawmaking. Instead, it often resembles a battleground of party dominance, with real policy discussions drowned out by slogans and shouts. Opposition is painted as treason. Dissent is punished. And backbenchers are expected to clap, not challenge.

This is not democracy. This is theatre. The people of Bangladesh deserve more. We deserve MPs who speak not just to cameras, but to constituents. Who spend time reading bills, visiting schools and clinics, listening to farmers and factory workers. MPs should be researchers, facilitators, and visionaries—not just carriers of party lines.

The speaker's office, too, must evolve. It should be an impartial guardian of parliamentary integrity, ensuring that every voice is heard, and every perspective debated. Real-time fact-checking, public scorecards, and constituency accountability reports should become standard tools in the political ecosystem.

The final transformation must be cultural. Politicians are not our masters. They are our employees. They don't rule us. They serve us. This mindset shift is already happening at the grassroots. People are more informed, more connected, and more assertive. They are no longer content with being spoken at—they want to be spoken with. They want transparency, access, and accountability. And they are willing to demand it.

Gone are the days when politicians could rule from a distance. Today's citizens want leaders who walk with them, speak like them, understand their struggles, and make decisions with heart and reason. They want leaders who show up—not just during election season, but all year round.

This is the moment. A new political awareness is blossoming in Bangladesh, and it's unstoppable. Anyone who ignores it—any party that tries to suppress it—will be left behind. To move ahead, we must reform our political institutions and reimagine the very architecture of leadership in the country. Political education must be integrated into our academic and civic life. Schools and universities should teach young people not just how to vote, but how to lead.

Party constitutions must change to enforce internal democracy. Campaign finance must be regulated to prevent the influence of black money. Media freedom must be protected so journalists can hold power accountable. And digital tools must be used to enhance—not manipulate—democratic participation. Most of all, we must stop celebrating survival and start demanding excellence. Our future depends on it.



A new political awareness is blossoming in Bangladesh, and it's unstoppable.

FILE PHOTO: AFP

Why? Because the current political structure is designed not to empower leadership, but to preserve control. It prioritises obedience over originality, visibility over vision, and loyalty over learning. It is a system built to maintain power, not to distribute it wisely.

This is where the old guard must be challenged—not disrespected, but challenged. The generation that led us through independence and beyond deserves our respect. They built a nation from scratch. But that struggle belongs to a different time. Today,

million lives. They represent us in international treaties, multilateral organisations, and global debates. How can we expect them to function without the tools required for that job?

In the 1970s, many of our national leaders came from humble backgrounds with little formal education. And yet, they led with vision and moral clarity. That was a different era. Today, we don't have the luxury of improvisation. Our politics must become professional, structured, and intellectually rigorous. Not because we want to imitate the West, but because the stakes are too high to

they are born into power, they can never access it. That message is corrosive to democracy.

If political parties are serious about representing the people, they must start building platforms for merit-based entry. They must engage universities, professional associations, and civil society in leadership scouting and development. Internships, shadowing opportunities, debates, and policy boot camps should be part of every party's outreach programme.

The next prime minister should not be chosen in a backroom negotiation or born into

How women are revolutionising our agriculture



Dr Susmita Das is principal documentation officer at Bangladesh Agricultural Research Council. She can be reached at susmitabar@gmail.com.

SUSMITA DAS

In Bangladesh's economy, agriculture plays a vital role in providing livelihoods for around 45.33 percent of the total labour force and contributing 11.38 percent to the Gross Domestic Product (GDP). Women are an indispensable part of the agricultural workforce. According to the Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO), women's agricultural work spans not only production but also post-harvest activities, such as processing, packaging, and marketing. These activities are essential in ensuring food security and promoting economic sustainability in rural communities. They are also associated with safe food production. However, despite their significant contributions, women's roles in agriculture are often underappreciated and undervalued, with numerous challenges, such as limited access to land, financial services, training, and modern technology, primarily due to entrenched social norms and gender biases.

According to the Labour Force Survey (LFS) 2022 of the Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics (BBS), the participation of women aged 15 and above in agriculture is 26.2 percent, while the rate for their male counterparts is 19.2 percent.

The country's highest employment-creating sector is gradually becoming dominated by females, with their engagement in agriculture and every agricultural subsector, including poultry and livestock, fisheries, and horticulture. The transformation that has been occurring for over a decade has already had a positive impact on the overall participation of women in the labour force in farming, while men are switching to urban services. The migration of men to urban areas in search of higher-paying jobs, as traditional farming becomes less lucrative, particularly in crop production, has

left women to manage agricultural activities to support their families' income.

The "feminisation of agriculture" is a growing phenomenon, as increasing numbers of women assume leadership roles in the sector. This shift can be attributed to several factors, such as livestock rearing, poultry farming, post-harvest operations, and seed preservation. Approximately 63 percent of women in rural areas are involved in preserving local seeds, which ensures biodiversity and sustainability in farming practices.

Women are predominantly responsible for managing cattle, poultry, and goats, which play a critical role in household nutrition and income. They are also essential in managing post-harvest activities, such as winnowing, sorting, primary processing, and storing crops. By managing diverse agricultural activities, women contribute to the availability of nutritious food, improving the health and well-being of their families.

Land ownership is a key determinant of agricultural production, yet women in Bangladesh face substantial challenges when it comes to owning or inheriting land.

According to the World Bank, only around 13 percent of women have sole or joint ownership of agricultural land, compared to 70 percent of men. For economic empowerment, Bangladeshi women need equal property rights. Cultural norms often prioritise male inheritance, and property laws frequently favour men, leaving women with little legal control over the land they work. This lack of control means women are unable to make independent decisions about farming practices, investments, or business opportunities. Furthermore, they are less likely to receive financial support from banks, which require land as collateral for loans.

Women in Bangladesh are also lagging in financial credit. The International Fund for Agricultural Development (IFAD) reports that women in rural Bangladesh are 20 percent less likely to access formal credit than men, primarily due to their lack of land ownership and social exclusion from financial institutions. This financial exclusion restricts women's ability to invest in technology or agricultural inputs, thus limiting their productivity and income potential.

Access to modern agricultural inputs and technology is also crucial for enhancing productivity. However, many women in rural Bangladesh are unable to access new technologies due to gender biases, lack of training, and limited mobility. According to a report from the Bangladesh Rural Development Board (BRDB), less than 30 percent of rural women have received agricultural training, compared to over 70 percent of men. Without access to modern farming techniques, women remain stuck in subsistence farming, unable to increase yields or improve efficiency.

To unlock the full potential of women in agriculture and address these challenges, several strategies must be implemented, such as legal reforms to ensure that women have equal access to land and property rights. The government should promote joint land ownership models, where both men and women in a household have legal control over the land. Creating gender-sensitive land registration processes and ensuring that women's names appear on land titles would allow women to secure loans and make independent decisions about farming. The World Bank has suggested that empowering women through secure land tenure could significantly increase agricultural productivity, as women tend to reinvest their earnings into their families and communities.

To enable women farmers to invest in modern agricultural practices, access to credit must be improved. Financial institutions should develop gender-sensitive loan products tailored to the needs of women farmers, with lower collateral requirements and flexible repayment terms. The microcredit programme, which Bangladesh has pioneered, provides some microfinance loans to rural women. Additionally, the

Bangladesh Bank should encourage gender-responsive banking practices and create schemes that prioritise women's access to financial resources.

Access to modern agricultural inputs and technology is essential for increasing productivity. Technological innovation plays a significant role in alleviating the labour-intensive nature of agriculture. Several women-friendly technologies have been introduced in Bangladesh to ease the burden of agricultural work. Fodder chopper machines simplify the chopping of grass for cattle feed, saving women valuable time and effort. This is a prime example of women-friendly technology that is making a significant impact on the lives of female farmers in rural Bangladesh. Hermetic Storage Bags provide an efficient and safe method for storing seeds, reducing the risks of pest infestations and moisture-related losses. They have proven to be especially beneficial for women who are responsible for seed preservation. BAU-STR Dryers, developed by Bangladesh Agricultural University, reduce grain loss during the drying process to 0.5 percent, compared to the 3-4 percent loss using traditional methods. The dryers are user-friendly and help maintain the quality of grain.

Paddy, wheat, and maize threshing are mechanised, which is considered women-friendly and affordable. Women's groups may organise themselves as service providers. Small-scale food processing, such as milk-based cheese, sweetmeats, and pickles, may be organised through self-help groups, and relevant micro-enterprise organisations may support them with skill development and business opportunities.

The government and NGOs should subsidise agricultural inputs, such as fertilisers, high-yielding seed varieties, and irrigation equipment for women farmers, including solar panel-based irrigation. Agricultural extension services should be restructured to be more inclusive of women, offering training programmes that cater to their specific needs. Female extension officers can help connect women farmers to resources and provide tailored advice on farming techniques, climate-smart practices, and pest management.

On a positive note, women are increasingly

participating in agricultural education, with about 40 percent of women enrolled in universities and training institutes. Thirty percent of women are engaged in agricultural extension, and 12 percent in agricultural research. This may be exploited in women-friendly agricultural programmes to intensify agricultural production and farm profitability. The Department of Agricultural Extension has made it mandatory to include women in forming farmers' clubs and farm schools. The farming system research approach has mainstreamed nutrition and safe food production, and women are participating in the programmes and receiving training on safe and nutritious production.

Education and training are crucial for enhancing women's agricultural productivity. Agricultural training programmes should be designed to address the specific needs of women, offering flexible schedules and locations. In addition to farming skills, women should be trained in business management, marketing, and financial literacy to help them manage their agricultural enterprises effectively.

For sustainable growth in agriculture, women must be included in decision-making processes at all levels. Encouraging women to take leadership roles in agricultural cooperatives and community organisations will ensure their voices are heard in policy and programme development. At the national level, policymakers should work to integrate women's perspectives into agricultural planning, ensuring that policies are designed to address the specific needs of female farmers.

The feminisation of agriculture in Bangladesh and South Asia is transforming the agri-food system. Women's participation has been recognised in all relevant policies. Accordingly, several programmes are being implemented—however, such programmes should be well coordinated. A favourable public policy environment and women-friendly farm operations need to be synchronised with an adequate R&D system. The organised farming and post-production system should be supported in entrepreneurship development. Capacity building of the farming community will be a prime task to make them a more productive segment of society.