The Daily Star
FOUNDER EDITOR: LATE S. M. ALI

Laws alone can't save women from rape

Mass awareness campaigns vital to prevent gender-based violence

Yet another young life has been lost because of society's failure to protect women and girls. A college student, who had been gang-raped six weeks ago, was found dead at her parents' home in Dhaka on Saturday night. Police suspect that the girl—daughter of a martyr of the July-August uprising—died by suicide. Reportedly, she had been raped by two men in Patuakhali's Dumki upazila on March 18 when she was returning to her maternal grandparents' home after visiting her father's grave. A case was later filed, and the accused were arrested. However, they had allegedly also taken photos of the victim and threatened to post them online if she reported the incident, according to the case file.

Prothom Alo reported that following her death, the girl's family filed an unnatural death case with the Adabor police station in Dhaka, quoting a police source who said they would investigate whether she had received threats from the alleged perpetrators. According to a report in this daily, the incident had left the girl deeply traumatised and she had been undergoing treatment. But is counselling enough when society at large constantly points fingers at rape survivors?

It is this very attitude—the deeply entrenched misogyny—that gives criminals the power to use rape and sexual violence as a weapon. How else can we explain the 105 gang rapes recorded last year and the 64 in just the first three months of this year (according to Ain o Salish Kendra)? Among the survivors of rape or gang rape, seven died by suicide in 2024, while two deaths by suicide were recorded between January and March. What's worse is that the majority of the victims are girls under 18.

We can blame our justice system—the slow legal process, the extremely low rape conviction rate, or the state's failure to provide comprehensive and free legal, medical, and psychological support—for the situation. But an unspoken truth remains: we, as a society, have failed to teach our men to respect women and see them as human beings, not commodities, not objects on which they can exercise power at will. As parents, we have failed to instil the right values in our sons, while simultaneously creating an environment where our daughters feel ashamed of their very existence.

While we hope the government takes appropriate measures to ensure that the Patuakhali victim's family gets justice swiftly, it must do much more for the millions of girls who do not feel safe or respected enough as human beings. Patriarchy must be fought and toxic masculinity uprooted through mass campaigns, education, and proper enforcement of laws to prevent misogynistic content and behaviour online, in social settings, and in religious sermons. Unless men learn to see women as equals, which they are, we will continue to lose precious lives like that of this college girl.

Address water crisis in Rangamati hills

Plight of women carrying pitchers calls for interventions

When we discuss water crisis in rural Bangladesh, we often talk about the coastal belt where approximately three crore people across 19 districts are said to lack access to safe drinking water. Women in these districts, including Khulna, Satkhira, and Bagerhat, often walk for miles carrying pitchers in search of water, their plight exacerbated by rising sea levels and erratic weather patterns that have pushed saltwater further inland, contaminating more groundwater sources. While this crisis is rightly recognised, even if solutions continue to be elusive, the plight of communities in the hills—including women—who also suffer from a similar crisis remains largely absent from national conversations.

A recent report by this daily rightly turns the focus on women in Rangamati hills. Aptly titled "Drops of water, waves of suffering," the report highlights the dual crisis involving shrinking water sources and women's backbreaking journeys to them. Women and girls in remote villages and hamlets have to walk for hours and miles to fetch water from wells that are steadily drying up. There are physical and emotional toll to be paid for these exhaustive trips: chronic back and knee pain, injuries, and dangers from wild animals and slippery trails. Another toll of this invisible labour involves risks of gender-based violence and missed opportunities for female students. In some areas, the crisis is so severe that villagers must cross rivers by boat to reach water sources.

Unfortunately, this daily grind of women carrying heavy pitchers remains largely unrecognised, and unaddressed. Even though people in the Chittagong Hill Tracts (CHT) have historically struggled with water scarcity, thanks to limited or unequal access to wells, springs, and streams, the crisis has been exacerbated by deforestation and environmental degradation, unsustainable agricultural practices, and, of course, climate change. The lack of more reliable water sources like tube wells or rainwater harvesting infrastructure, as well as the challenges of transporting water across mountainous terrains, are adding to their struggles. This should be addressed with priority. People in the hills need long-term solutions, not scattered efforts. For them, the crisis is not just of water. Given how profoundly it impacts them, it is also a life crisis, a public health emergency, and a human rights issue.

THIS DAY IN HISTORY

CBS airs Abu Ghraib prison photos

On this day in 2004, American TV network CBS aired photos taken at the American-run Abu Ghraib prison outside Baghdad, depicting harsh treatment of Iraqi inmates that goes against the Geneva Conventions.

Rising gas prices threaten our investment prospects

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M. SHAMSUL ALAM

On April 13, 2025, despite objections from businesses and consumer rights organisations, the Bangladesh Energy Regulatory Commission (BERC) set new gas prices for new industries, raising the tariff from Tk 30 to Tk 40 per unit. For captive power plants, the tariff has been increased from Tk 31.50 to Tk 42 per unit. This increased rate will also apply to existing customers if they use more than 50 percent of their approved load.

At a time when the government has presented the country as an attractive destination for global business through the Bangladesh Investment Summit 2025, this gas price hike has caused concern among industrial consumers who are worried about investments getting stalled by increased gas prices. A business leader pointed out that the method used to determine gas prices was flawed; VAT is being imposed at both the import and distribution stages. Meanwhile, gas theft continues without effective measures to prevent it. Instead, to cover the losses, the gas price is being increased, he remarked.

This differential pricing has caused discrepancies in energy costs for similar operations, disrupted the level playing field, and weakened national competitiveness in industrial sectors—posing a threat to both domestic and foreign investments. A transparent and fair energy pricing is essential to maintain investor confidence and ensure industrial growth. The said BERC order to increase gas prices is inconsistent with the goals of economic development and attracting investment. No effective initiatives have been taken to explore our own gas resources. Instead, the government has become overly dependent on LNG imports, which primarily benefit an oligarchic class. One of the core foundations for attracting foreign investment is energy security. Repeated abnormal hikes in gas prices disrupt energy security and create uncertainty in investment security.

In Bangladesh, the ratio of private investment in terms of GDP, which has been historically underwhelming, is now on the decline. In FY2021-22, the private investment to GDP ratio was 24.52 percent. By FY2023-24, it fell down to 23.96 percent, according to a Prothom Alo report. In the first six months of FY2024-25, foreign direct investment in the country amounted to only $213 million, a significantly lower amount than the $744 million during the same period the previous fiscal year. If investment cannot be increased, employment will decline, people's income will decrease, and young people will not get the jobs they hope for.

Statistics on private bank loans and the import of capital machinery also reflect stagnation in investment. In February 2025, private sector credit growth dropped to 6.82 percent—the lowest in the past 10 years. Between July 2024 and February 2025, capital machinery imports shrunk by nearly 25 percent. The main issue is the lack of energy security, which is making the investment environment unfavourable. To address the gas crisis, the government, in 2023, raised industrial gas prices by up to 178 percent while promising increased LNG supply. Yet, the crisis remains unresolved. In January, Petrobangla proposed to raise gas prices for industries by 152 percent, aligning the rate with the cost of LNG supply.

System loss in gas distribution and transmission is 13.53 percent. However, according to BERC's own estimates, it is just 1.12 percent—the rest is due to wastage and theft. As I have mentioned before, if the value of these losses were not adjusted into the pricing, around Tk 10,870 crore of taxpayers' money could have been saved annually.

VAT is being charged twice in gas pricing. The BERC technical committee recommended charging VAT only once, which would reduce annual predatory expenses by approximately Tk 3,548 crore. In contrast, a 33 percent hike in gas prices for industrial and captive power use is expected to generate only about Tk 713 crore in additional annual revenue.

These figures clearly demonstrate that simply making VAT and system loss fair and reasonable could prevent predatory expenses, potentially saving Tk 14,418 crore annually. Yet, instead of eliminating these predatory costs, BERC has arbitrarily raised industrial gas prices under a separate gas pricing structure—beyond its jurisdiction.

Domestic gas supply in FY2022-23, FY2023-24, and FY2024-25 was 22,651, 21,082, and 20,067 (projected) million cubic metres, respectively. This consistent decline indicates a deepening energy crisis. Currently, LNG accounts for 25 percent of the total gas supply—a figure projected to rise to 75 percent by 2030. In light of this, the government is now determined to sell gas to industrial consumers at the LNG rate of Tk 79.34 per cubic metre. Meanwhile, all charges related to energy supply are being raised to abnormal levels.

VISUAL: ANWAR SOHEL

After gaining power for pricing, the previous government increased gas production, transmission, and distribution charges by approximately 40 percent, 114 percent, and 60 percent, respectively, within a year. The charges of Petrobangla and Rupantarita Prakritik Gas Company Ltd (RPGCL) were raised by 24 percent and 109 percent, respectively. The gas price was increased by 150 percent, 155 percent, and 178 percent for large, medium, and small and cottage industries, respectively. For captive power, the increase was 97 percent, and for electricity, it was 209 percent. Under the current government, a 33 percent hike has already been implemented. In this context, BERC stated that gas distribution companies had proposed raising prices by over 150 percent for new industries, but acknowledged that such a jump would be too difficult to bear at this moment.

In the public hearing held in 2022, it was revealed that 65 percent of the Gas Development Fund remained unspent. Only 35 percent was used to pay foreign contractors. National capacity development was not prioritised. As a result, by 2030, 75 percent of gas supply is projected to come from LNG. This trend remains unchanged under the current administration.

Earlier on February 13, 2025, the Consumers Association of Bangladesh (CAB) sent a letter to BERC. In a press conference on February 22, CAB proposed postponing the public hearing on gas price hikes and reducing energy prices by eliminating predatory expenses. During the hearing held on February 26, CAB recommended rejecting the unjust and unreasonable gas price hike proposal. In the post-hearing report dated March 4, the following recommendations were forwarded:

i) Under the amended Section 34 Ka of the BERC Act, all pricing orders issued by the ministry concerning energy should be revoked, and new prices should be set by BERC.

ii) The total amount of predatory costs adjusted into energy pricing during the previous government's tenure should be determined, and existing rates should be reduced by excluding such costs and excessive government revenue.

iii) A tribunal led by a retired Supreme Court judge should be formed to bring energy criminals to justice.

iv) The BERC Act should be amended to ensure energy justice and protect consumer rights.

v) A reform commission under BERC, comprising stakeholder representatives, should be formed to restructure the energy sector, ensuring affordability and availability for consumers.

BERC did not respond at all to these proposals. Instead, it showed particular interest in aligning industrial gas pricing with the high cost of LNG, leading to discriminatory pricing.

It indicates that the previous government not only turned the country into a net importer of energy, but also initiated a process to make it an import-dependent market for industrial goods. Is the current government going to continue following the same trajectory?

We must diversify our trade infrastructure after India's ban

RMG NOTES

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MOSTAFIZ UDDIN

Just recently, India revoked a key transhipment facility that allowed Bangladesh to export goods to third countries via Indian land borders. This is a fresh blow to Dhaka at a time when it is already potentially facing steep US tariffs on its exports, although that story is still unfolding.

In a circular, India's customs department announced the withdrawal of a 2020 provision that had permitted the movement of Bangladeshi goods through Indian land customs stations to ports and airports using containers or closed-body trucks.

Citing rising delays and logistical costs that were reportedly hampering India's own exports and creating congestion, the Indian Ministry of External Affairs defended the move as a necessity. However, the timing of the move, with so many Asian countries facing major trading challenges, is unfortunate, to say the least.

The revocation is expected to disrupt trade flows to neighbouring countries such as Nepal, Bhutan, and Myanmar. These are routes on which Bangladeshi exporters have increasingly relied for accessing regional markets.

Bangladesh's garment industry, the largest contributor to our export economy, typically prioritises direct sea routes to key western markets. However, the development curtails opportunities for regional integration and logistics flexibility. While the direct impact on garments may be limited, the decision nonetheless restricts regional trade potential. India remains a major trading partner for Bangladesh, and the decision signals a troubling shift in bilateral relations.

These developments have unfolded against a backdrop of political instability in Bangladesh, where former Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina reportedly sought temporary refuge in India following mass protests last year. The context may further complicate an already tense diplomatic environment.

What this decision ultimately means for Bangladesh's ready-made garment (RMG) industry is not so much a direct disruption to our largest export channels, but a broader signal of geopolitical vulnerability and logistical fragility.

The RMG sector, which accounts for the vast majority of Bangladesh's foreign earnings, thrives on the predictability of access. This includes access to raw materials, ports, stable shipping routes, and markets. The removal of India's transhipment privilege undercuts one such access point, even if it is not the most critical. It introduces an element of uncertainty and reinforces the importance of transport diversification at a time when our country is being buffeted by rising global protectionism.

While most Bangladeshi garments are exported directly to the US and Europe by sea, land-based transhipment through India has been important for accessing niche markets in South Asia. For smaller and medium-sized exporters, particularly those serving Nepal and Bhutan, the now-closed facility offered a cost-effective and faster alternative to more circuitous sea and air routes. The loss of this infrastructure introduces delays, reroutes shipments, and adds financial pressure, especially on firms already operating on tight margins in a highly competitive industry.

The move also reflects an erosion of the regional trade optimism that had accompanied past agreements. For Bangladesh, whose growth increasingly depends on diversifying markets and building intra-Asian supply chains, India's decision is not just an operational hindrance; it is also a strategic setback. The promise of a more connected South Asia, where goods could flow seamlessly across borders and regional markets could develop complementary strengths, now seems further away. This is particularly frustrating for Dhaka, which has worked toward liberalising trade relations in recent years, positioning itself as a bridge between South and Southeast Asia.

In light of these changes, Bangladesh must rethink its diplomatic and industrial strategies. We can no longer afford to rely heavily on a small group of export markets and limited transit agreements. There is now an urgent need to deepen relations with alternative trade partners, particularly in Southeast Asia, the Middle East, and Africa. At the same time, we must invest more heavily in domestic port infrastructure and explore regional maritime routes to bypass dependency on Indian land.

The garment industry, for its part, will need to future-proof its operations by embracing resilience across multiple dimensions. This includes strengthening supply chain management to accommodate unexpected transit disruptions, enhancing factory compliance to attract new buyers under stricter sourcing standards, and adopting digital tools to gain real-time visibility into logistics networks. Garment manufacturers may also consider vertical integration or collaboration with regional partners to offset the higher costs imposed by disrupted trade corridors and protectionist tariffs.

The move by India serves as a wake-up call. The interconnectedness of geopolitics and trade logistics is becoming more pronounced, and Bangladesh's RMG sector sits squarely at the crossroads. To navigate the new terrain, we must move swiftly and decisively to position Bangladesh not just as a low-cost supplier but as a smart, adaptable, and strategic partner in global value chains.

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