

Takeaways from Bangladesh's latest human development indicators



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The 2025 Human Development Report titled "A Matter of Choice: People and Possibilities in the Age of AI" is out. In addition to its substantive content, the report has ranked 193 countries and territories in terms of the Human Development Index (HDI), using 2023 internationally comparable data. The HDI is a composite measure of life expectancy at birth, educational attainment comprising mean and expected years of schooling, and per capita income in purchasing power parity dollars. In this year's global HDI ranking, Iceland has replaced Switzerland as the top country in the HDI league. Meanwhile, Somalia has jumped above South Sudan, pushing the latter to the bottom of the league. In fact, in the HDI ranking, the top and bottom five countries have remained the same, even though they have interchanged places.

Three observations are pertinent to the report and the index. First, like any other concept and its relevant measure, the notion of human development is broader than the index, which does not capture the totality or richness of the concept of human development. Second, the HDI embraces some basic dimensions of human development—e.g. a long and healthy life, knowledge, and standard of living—but not broader aspects such as participation, human security, and environmental sustainability. Third, the journalistic obsession and political interest in the report lie in the ranking of countries. In the process, the richness of its content and policy options is often overlooked. In that context, it should be made clear that the preoccupation with the HDI ranking can lead to misleading conclusions. For example, the HDI ranking of a country may go down despite increases in its HDI value, either because another country's HDI value has



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increased more, or because more countries are included in the HDI league. Therefore, it should not lead to the conclusion that the country whose HDI ranking has gone down is doing badly in human development.

In Bangladesh too, the hype is all about our HDI ranking. Bangladesh's HDI value in this year's report is 0.685. It was 0.680 in last year's report. Over the past 35 years, the HDI value of Bangladesh has gone up by 72 percent. Yet, the HDI discussions in the country hover around whether Bangladesh's ranking has moved up or down and how

it compares to those of our neighbours. Similarly, the focus of the current discourse is that the HDI ranking of Bangladesh has dropped from 129 last year to 130 this year; in the regional context, the HDI rankings of Sri Lanka and the Maldives are well ahead of that of Bangladesh, etc.

In my view, the HDI discussion in Bangladesh should focus on some fundamental issues with policy implications.

Second, like the notion of a "middle-income trap," Bangladesh also seems to be stuck in a "medium human development trap" for more than a decade, even though its HDI value has improved. The question is: what is holding us back? When we look at the components, we find that there has been a gain of two years in life expectancy since 2021, the expected years of schooling have marginally improved, but there has been a decrease in mean years of schooling and not enough increase in per capita income. So, the policy priority to push Bangladesh into high human development should focus, among other things, on how average years of schooling can be improved and how economic growth can be accelerated. Let us also have a look at Sri Lanka. Because of its long-term human development achievements, Sri Lanka has been in the high human development category for quite some time. Although Sri Lanka experienced economic, political, and social turmoil in 2022, the country could steer through the challenges and impediments, increase its life expectancy by two years, maintain its per capita income, and contain the slide in its HDI value to only 0.006—from 0.782 in 2021 to 0.776 in 2023. As we move forward, what can we learn from Sri Lanka, given the socio-economic changes in Bangladesh over the past year?

Third, India has now caught up with the HDI value of Bangladesh. In 2021, the HDI value of Bangladesh was 0.641 and that of India was 0.633. Two years later, in 2023, both countries have achieved an HDI value of 0.685. As a result, the two countries' 2021 HDI ranking gap (Bangladesh 129 and India 132) has been closed, and both countries now share an HDI ranking of 130. India closed the HDI value gap with Bangladesh because of a gain of five years in life expectancy (from 67 years in 2021 to 72 years in 2023) and by increasing its expected years of schooling from 12 to 13 years. It would be worthwhile to assess how India has improved its human development outcomes.

Fourth, the data reported in the global Human Development Report are internationally comparable data that come from standardising national data—the mother of all global data. If national statistical authorities in different countries strengthen

their processes of reliable and robust data collection and make them available to respective UN agencies mandated to collect different types of human development data, the data reported in the global Human Development Report will be greatly improved. National policies should be geared to this effort.

Fifth, looking at the Gender Development Index (GDI), which is a ratio of female to male HDI, the disparities between female and male human development outcomes in Bangladesh are obvious. To start with, while the male HDI value is 0.708, the female HDI is 0.650. Because of a biological edge, female life expectancy at 76 years is higher than male life expectancy at 73 years. Other than that, women in Bangladesh are at a disadvantageous position vis-à-vis mean years of schooling and per capita income. The female mean years of schooling at 6.2 years is less than the 7.3 years for men. Women's per capita income is half that of men. Only in expected years of schooling are women, with 12.4 years, ahead of men at 11.9 years. All this begs the question: what policies need to be pursued to reduce gender disparities in human development outcomes?

As Bangladesh moves forward, there will be domestic and global economic challenges with implications for human development. On the domestic front, economic sluggishness, high inflation and unemployment, and volatilities in the banking and external sectors will pose challenges to human development. On the global front, the issue of Bangladesh's LDC graduation, the global tariff war, and conflicts in different parts of the world will affect the human development situation in Bangladesh.

Human resources are the greatest asset of Bangladesh. Therefore, the development of the country critically hinges on the human development of its people. It requires identification of the obstacles to human development, analysis of the challenges, and formulation of strategies to overcome them. We can try to fix the country's economic structure, work towards its macroeconomic stability, and undertake infrastructural development, but in the ultimate analysis, we have to prioritise human development in Bangladesh, as there is no other alternative.

Why our industrial future depends on women

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The July uprising of 2024 paved the way for reimagining Bangladesh's economic future. There is a powerful opportunity to reshape the country's industrial policy to make it more inclusive, strategic, and forward-looking and it means putting women, the half of the population, in front and centre. Despite achieving significant progress, Bangladesh still lacks policies that fully support women across diverse industries and promote their inclusion in the labour force.

Gender integration should no longer be treated as a social obligation, it must be seen as an economic strategy. Gendered industrial policy, particularly in the ready-made garments (RMG) sector, is not just desirable but essential for a just and sustainable economic transition post-July 2024.

Since the late 1980s, women have been integral to the industrial development of Bangladesh, especially in the export-orientated RMG sector. This feminisation of labour was not accidental; it was incentivised by both state policies and the global demand for cheap labour. Women were seen as "docile," willing to accept lower wages, and less likely to unionise. This strategy paid off in GDP terms: by 2022, the RMG sector alone accounted for over 80 percent of Bangladesh's export earnings, with women making up approximately 60 percent of its workforce (UNDP, 2023).

However, this economic success came with gendered costs. Despite their contribution, women workers were largely excluded from policy dialogues, workplace protections, and leadership roles within the industry. The very policies that enabled industrial growth often

treated women's labour as a means to an end, not as a subject of development.

Most current gender-related policies in Bangladesh are welfare orientated: they focus on microcredit schemes, skills development, or social safety nets. While these are important, they are not successful in integrating women into the core of economic planning. The concept of "gender mainstreaming" has often been reduced to tokenistic inclusivity, rather than a subject of development.

What is needed is a shift from welfare to strategy. A truly gendered industrial policy must ask how economic policies can work for women, not merely with them. This requires a rethinking of how incentives, trade policies, labour laws, and technological advancements impact female workers across sectors.

Feminist economists such as Gita Sen and Naila Kabeer have long emphasised that markets are not gender neutral, and overlooking this fact leads to flawed economic outcomes. Even 2024 reports by the IMF and World Bank support this statement, where they showed that closing gender gaps in the labour market could raise the GDP of Bangladesh by up to 40 percent. This makes gender equity not only a moral responsibility but also a macroeconomic opportunity.

The RMG sector is the clearest example of gendered exclusion in economic policy. Despite their majority in numbers, female workers have little control over their working conditions. Labour rights violations, wage theft, sexual harassment, and lack of maternity support continue to plague the industry.

Moreover, automation and shifting global trade patterns now threaten the jobs of thousands of female RMG workers. Without policy intervention, the transition to higher-value manufacturing will likely displace women first. In this context, gender-responsive industrial upgrading becomes essential. Policies should prioritise retraining female workers, subsidising their entry into new sectors like electronics or

agro-processing, and promoting female entrepreneurship through access to finance and market linkages. The World Bank adds that increasing female participation in manufacturing alone could boost the output of the sector by 21 percent. These figures show the strategic value of expanding women's roles as Bangladesh moves up the

small-scale renewable energy technologies, which include training programmes and support for income-generating activities to enhance women's economic empowerment.

The gender-inclusive policies of Seychelles aim to expand employment opportunities for women beyond traditional sectors. It emphasises capacity building to enable



Despite their majority in numbers, female RMG workers have little control over their working conditions.

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industrial ladder. For example, the RMG Sustainability Council (RSC) can expand its mandate beyond compliance to include gender equity metrics. The Bangladesh Investment Development Authority (BIDA) and the Export Promotion Bureau (EPB) can actively incentivise firms that adopt gender-inclusive workplace practices. While the 2022 Industrial Policy briefly mentions women's participation, future policies must firmly integrate gender targets into their core framework.

Several countries offer useful lessons. Tunisia has integrated gender goals into its industrial upgrading programmes, leading to a more balanced distribution of skilled jobs. The country is also promoting female entrepreneurship in rural areas through

women to take on more diverse roles in manufacturing and other industries. The government of Chile offers financial incentives such as bonuses on grants for female-led firms. Gender equality is integrated into industrial development through national strategic plans and training programmes of the Chilean economic development agency, CORFO. The industrial parks in Ethiopia include mandatory daycare centres and female-friendly infrastructure, improving female labour force retention. Vietnam's textile industry invests heavily in technical education for women, ensuring they are not left behind in the shift to automation.

Bangladesh can learn from these models by adapting them to local contexts without just being a mere copycat. When gender is

seen as a productivity issue rather than just a social one, policy innovation is bound to happen.

To move forward, Bangladesh must integrate gender at every level of industrial policy. The government can offer tax benefits or subsidies to firms that show evident progress in gender equity. This includes narrowing the gender wage gap, promoting women to leadership roles, and ensuring access to safe transport and child care. Technical training centres should prioritise women in emerging sectors like IT, electronics, green energy, and logistics by reserving seats and providing stipends. The recommendations by the IMF also align with them, which is to include women in climate-adaptive sectors and green industry, essential for sustainable growth.

Key ministries such as the Ministry of Industries, Ministry of Commerce, and Ministry of Labour and Employment need to establish gender audit systems. Authorities must also mandate female representation in industry associations. According to the World Bank, female labour participation has stagnated at 37 percent in recent years despite proven economic benefits. The IMF identifies unpaid care burdens and limited property rights as major obstacles to unlocking the full economic potential of the female workforce. So, the labour laws should be updated to improve maternity benefits, enforce anti-harassment measures, and guarantee equal pay for equal work. These are not radical demands, they are pragmatic steps toward building an inclusive economy.

The July uprising has opened a rare political window for structural reform. To achieve economic justice, policymakers must place gender justice at the heart of industrial strategy. A gendered industrial policy does not undermine efficiency or growth; it redefines them. As Bangladesh prepares for a new economic future, it must recognise that industrialisation without women is neither just nor sustainable.

CROSSWORD BY THOMAS JOSEPH

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