

Don't exclude women with disabilities

Their plight demands urgent, multi-sectoral intervention

We are alarmed by the stark realities revealed at a recent seminar on the lack of rights and services available to women with disabilities in Bangladesh. Experts at the event, held at The Daily Star Centre on Thursday, highlighted how underrepresented and excluded these women remain across multiple sectors, including education, training, employment, healthcare, social participation, policy and funding, legal access, etc. The cumulative effect of all these gaps on both the women and the nation in general is profound, underscoring the urgent need for comprehensive interventions.

The problem seems to begin with the underreporting of their numbers, as women with disabilities are not adequately represented in official statistics. This lack of visibility in data leads to a policy blind spot, making it difficult to design targeted interventions or allocate resources for specific needs. This is already evident across the many sectors where women with disabilities consistently lag behind. For instance, while 55 percent of men with disabilities are illiterate, the figure for women rises to 72 percent. Their participation in vocational training is equally dismal. Moreover, only 11.34 percent of such women participate in the labour force. And among those employed, only 3.13 percent work in the formal sector, with the vast majority (96.87 percent) engaged in informal work.

These numbers illustrate the structural barriers that deny them access to even the most basic opportunities for advancement. When it comes to healthcare, the picture is equally troubling, with over 37 percent being deprived of essential care due to poverty, lack of family support, poor infrastructure, privacy concerns, etc. Their gynaecological and reproductive health needs are almost entirely overlooked; even hospital toilets remain largely inaccessible for them. They also face disproportionately high rates of mental, physical and sexual abuse, especially those with intellectual and speech impairments.

These challenges are further exacerbated by systemic exclusions as exemplified by the absence of a specific state-wide protocol or employment policy for them, or that of a dedicated women's disability corner at the National Disability Development Foundation or within the Department of Social Services, which could begin to redress some of the imbalance. Accessing courts also remains a major hurdle, with the legal system not even recording or recognising disability status in court documentation.

But we cannot continue to ignore the plight of a community that constitutes about 15 percent of the population. While we welcome the gradual increase in government allowances for persons with disabilities, all such efforts risk becoming token gestures without a strategic, multi-sectoral approach to guide them. We, therefore, urge the government to undertake comprehensive institutional and legal measures to insulate these vulnerable individuals from abuse, exclusion and systemic barriers, so that they can reach their potential like all other citizens. Greater research and funding support for relevant organisations are also crucial.

Revive information, rights commissions

These oversight institutions must not be left in limbo any longer

We share Transparency International Bangladesh's (TIB) concern over the interim government's failure to set up the National Human Rights Commission (NHRC) and the Information Commission since assuming office on August 8, 2024. This inertia surrounding the operationalisation of two crucial statutory bodies is alarming, especially as the country has witnessed repeated crimes and human rights abuses in recent months.

Following the ousting of the Awami League regime, many politically appointed officials in the administration and statutory or autonomous bodies either resigned or were removed. On September 10, the then chief information commissioner along with another commissioner were suspended. Later, on November 7, the then NHRC chairman and all five members resigned. Since then, as the TIB has noted, the interim government has taken no visible steps as yet to reconstitute these commissions.

The importance of the functions of these bodies cannot be overstated. Many rights defenders, including this newspaper, have called for the revival and proper empowerment of these organisations, which are governed by a statutory process where the president appoints commissioners based on recommendations from a selection committee. The legal procedure exists, so why has the government failed to act for more than six months? This is particularly baffling given that many advisers in the interim cabinet previously led rights institutions themselves. One would have expected them to prioritise the restoration and strengthening of the NHRC and the Information Commission, not delay it.

To its credit, the government recently signed an MoU with the Office of the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR), paving the way for a UN rights mission in Bangladesh for three years. However, this international initiative with its broad-based mandate cannot replace a national rights body embedded within the country's legal and institutional framework. A properly reconstituted NHRC, with adequate independence and resources, could play a critical role in investigating rights violations—such as use of excessive force by security forces, mob violence, or any discrimination faced by marginalised groups—and providing remedies to victims. It could also advise the government on rights-related reforms. Likewise, a properly empowered Information Commission is essential to ensuring citizens' right to information, particularly in an era of heightened public demand for transparency around critical developments, controversial decisions, etc.

The formation of these two commissions is thus essential to rebuilding public trust and democratic oversight, especially ahead of the upcoming elections. We urge the government to immediately form the selection committees, appoint commissioners, and amend relevant laws or rules to ensure these bodies are not only restored but also empowered to act.

Can decentralisation improve primary school outcomes?

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It is a matter of abiding shame and regret that the majority of our children—aged 10-14 years, including many who have completed five years of primary education—cannot read, write or count at a functional level. The World Bank's learning poverty assessment for low- and middle-income countries says so. This unhappy outcome of the primary education system is corroborated by the national student assessment reports prepared under the Directorate of Primary Education, the latest one for 2022.

This is so despite the government's and development partners' investments through a series of primary education development programmes (PEDPs) carried out over two decades. The fourth phase of PEDP is about to close and the PEDP5 will be launched in 2026. Can the fifth phase mark a new beginning so that the clock begins to move in the students' learning outcome?

Popular expectations were high about education reform when Prof Muhammad Yunus took the reign of the interim government nearly a year ago. The surge of reform initiatives of the new government did not include an education reform commission. Only a consultation committee on primary and non-formal education (PNFECC) was appointed in October 2024 by the Ministry of Primary and Mass Education with one of the authors here as the convener. The nine-member committee recommended over a hundred action points grouped under eight clusters, aimed at "overcoming the stagnation in quality." The report was handed to Prof Yunus on February 10 this year. He eagerly listened to the committee members, asked many questions, and promised serious consideration of the report and early follow-up action.

More than five months later, on July 16, after a meeting with the adviser and senior personnel of the primary education ministry, Prof Yunus, according to press reports, directed that urgent steps be taken to fill the headteachers' posts, which lie vacant in about half of the 65,000 government primary schools in the country. He also urged that teacher transfer, a sore point for many teachers, be transparent, school infrastructure be made more girl-friendly, and internet and multimedia facilities be extended to all primary schools.

One may wonder why the chief

adviser's instruction was necessary regarding such basic conditions as ensuring a headteacher is available to provide leadership for good management of each school, or a school's physical facilities not become an obstacle to learning and teaching for girl students and female staff. Furthermore, why is basic instructional technology including internet connectivity not a common feature yet



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in primary schools?

Will the chief adviser's instruction make much difference? These problems were to be tackled under the PEDP4, which has been in operation since 2018. The consultation committee also recommended specific measures regarding school leadership and filling immediately the headteachers' and other field-level vacancies to be taken immediately. Actions regarding infrastructure and technology were also recommended. Suggestions were made about necessary actions in making each school function effectively. As it turns out, an initiative and a mechanism with a sense of urgency have been absent. Only some sporadic and uncoordinated decisions, which are in the nature of the ongoing administrative steps, have been taken.

Bureaucratic inertia, top-down decision-making with indifference to diverse field conditions, frequent indecisiveness, and a lack of proactive anticipation of problems have been characteristic in education management. How can this culture and

mindset change?

Many of the problems mentioned have been identified in the earlier phases of PEDP; some steps have been taken and resources expended without satisfactory results. For instance, the Upazila Primary Education Plan (UPEP) and School Level Improvement Plan (SLIP) have been half-hearted efforts labelled as decentralised management. The former remained an academic exercise in a few locations with no follow-up through actual implementation steps and budget allocations. The latter amounted to small funds handed to schools for spending under highly restrictive central controls. A lack of conviction and commitment at the central level about devolution of authority and deep-seated mistrust of field personnel's capacity prevented meaningful decentralisation. The commitment of political and

and accountable management of schools. In Nepal, decentralisation of school governance has been taken since 2017 as an element of national democratic transformation. Sri Lanka, an outlier in the region with its superior performance in students' learning outcome, has decentralised school management as an essential element in reconciling ethnic, language and economic divisions.

In Bangladesh, the PNFECC report recommends that the government take a stand on decentralised governance of the basic education services. It urges that decentralisation initiatives be taken with the aim of more effective and dynamic management. The committee specifically recommends carrying out a pilot decentralisation programme within the PEDP5 as the first step towards meaningful decentralisation of primary education. The pilot is proposed for 20 upazilas; the aim would be to prepare plans, involve government and non-government providers in assessing total education needs in an upazila, secure necessary resources, and implement the plans through decentralised management (PNFECC Report, Chapter 6).

The convergence of strategic actions and efforts in an administrative area (an upazila) can overcome the obstacles of overly centralised management. A decentralised trial for creating effective schools and successful learners can be a distinctive feature of the PEDP5. For the initiative to succeed, it will require:

- High-level political commitment, support and assurance of proper technical capacity with the combination of appropriate international and national expertise through institutional collaboration for this purpose.

- Designation by the primary education ministry of a small high-level technical advisory committee, which will help guide the pilot programme's development and implementation within the PEDP5 programme framework with due consideration of risks and potentials and advise the minister-in-charge on policy-level decisions by the ministry and the government.

- Identifying and recruiting an international and national technical support team to begin necessary preparatory activities.

If the 20 upazila pilot receives government support and priority attention, by the midpoint of PEDP5, the pilot could be extended to 100 upazilas across the country, envisaging nationwide coverage in the next phase of the PEDP.

The authors wrote the book 'Political Economy of Education in South Asia: Fighting Poverty, Inequality and Exclusion' (University of Toronto Press, Toronto and Prothoma, Dhaka, 2022).

No equality without menstrual dignity



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Menstruation, once shrouded in silence, stigma and taboo, has now gained global recognition as a critical human rights concern. This shift in perspective has highlighted that menstrual health is not merely a hygiene issue. In Bangladesh, a nation striving for gender equality amid its development journey, the pursuit of dignified menstrual health for all is fraught with persistent challenges.

In 2005, the World Health Organization (WHO) and UNICEF introduced the concept of menstrual hygiene management (MHM). By 2022, the UN Human Rights Council (UNHRC) established a link between menstrual hygiene and menstrual health. This broader understanding embraces the physical, psychological and social dimensions of menstruation, demanding access to information, education, products, WASH (water, sanitation, and hygiene) services, empathetic care, and an environment free from shame and discrimination.

Attaining menstrual health, as defined by global health and human rights bodies, is a multifaceted endeavour. It involves ensuring that individuals have access to accurate, age-appropriate information, supportive facilities, and affordable materials for bodily care; timely

diagnosis and treatment for discomforts; a stigma-free and respectful environment; and a mindset free from taboos, enabling full participation in all aspects of life without exclusion or discrimination due to menstruation.

This complex issue is intrinsically linked to a range of human rights, including access to water and sanitation, dignity, health, education, equality, sexual and reproductive rights, labour rights, and participation in public life. Furthermore, addressing menstrual health directly contributes to several of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).

Bangladesh has taken commendable steps to embed human rights principles within its governance. The constitution upholds gender equality, health, non-discrimination, participation and inclusion, and sustainability in several of its articles. The Ministry of Health and Family Welfare oversees the health of women and girls, as well as the availability, accessibility, quality, and affordability of menstrual products, often working in conjunction with the ministries of commerce and women and children affairs.

Effective menstrual management depends on access to and use of safe water, safely managed sanitation

and hygiene services, as well as the availability of affordable products. Government circulars even encourage the establishment of separate WASH blocks for girls and boys in schools. Policies aim to ensure access to safe water and sanitation services at an affordable cost, including public latrines in schools and public places, and to expand access for all.

Educational policies play a pivotal role in promoting menstrual hygiene management. National strategies focus on developing sanitation facilities that integrate menstrual hygiene management and support strategic leadership for a national platform, ensuring that everyone is informed and aware of the importance of MHM.

In schools, government circulars have mandated the installation of improved, gender-segregated toilets in secondary and higher secondary institutions, including waste bins, soap, and water for female students. These circulars also include a vital stipulation: female teachers should discuss menstruation with female students and ensure the availability of sanitary napkins.

In the workplace, while the National Menstrual Hygiene Management Strategy 2021 notes that WASH facilities are often not gender-friendly in most government offices—lacking proper maintenance, soap, bins, and washing amenities—it aims to ensure that MHM facilities are accessible in all settings, including workplaces, prisons, industries, and commercial spaces.

Educational programmes, sometimes in collaboration with international partners, aim to provide school-based interventions

on menstrual management. National strategies also seek to strengthen menstrual health education in school curricula for both boys and girls, including students who have dropped out of school. In health institutions, strategies seek to ensure accessible MHM facilities and equip healthcare outlets to provide services in "woman-friendly units."

The affordability of menstrual products and sanitation facilities remains a significant challenge. While products need not always be free, economic reasons should never deprive anyone of dignity or the ability to participate in daily activities. Menstrual products are essential items and therefore should ideally be classified as such for tax purposes, exempting them from VAT and making them more affordable.

There are limited laws or regulations in Bangladesh specifically ensuring the affordability of menstrual products. Although tax exemptions on raw materials for sanitary napkin production were intended to improve affordability, their actual impact depends on whether manufacturers pass those cost savings on to consumers. Concerns have been raised that these tax cuts may have primarily benefited a dominant company, while VAT continues to be charged.

What is needed is a cohesive, rights-based approach: clear legal frameworks, sustained investment in infrastructure and product access, rigorous quality standards, and inclusive public education. By treating menstrual health as a core issue of dignity and justice, Bangladesh has the opportunity to set a powerful example in the region and beyond.