

The law just made it harder to get justice for domestic abuse



MIND THE GAP

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If you're a Bangladeshi woman, unfortunately married to a monster who believes "dowry" is just another word for "marriage subscription fee", felicitations, the government has just gifted you a shiny new hoop to jump through before you can get justice. It's called the Legal Aid Services (Amendment) Ordinance, 2025, but I like to think of it as the "*Loading After Six Months Ordinance*". Previously, if your husband slapped you around because the fridge your parents gave him wasn't the latest model, you could march directly to court under Section II(ga) of the Women and Children Repression Prevention Act, 2000. That little section—bless its dry, legal bones—made "simple hurt" for dowry demands a criminal offence, punishable by two to five years in prison and a fine. Simple hurt is the legal term for injuries that don't need an

and justice. Now, thanks to this ordinance, before you can even think about seeing the inside of a courtroom, you must toddle off to a legal aid officer and sit through mandatory "mediation". Yes, you read that right. As in, "let's sit you and your abuser at the same table with tea and biscuits, and see if we can't sort this little *misunderstanding* out." This is the part where the legal scholars will gently remind us that mediation is a noble tool of alternative dispute resolution—quicker, cheaper, less adversarial. True. Mediation works wonders when you're disputing a property boundary or who gets the family farmland. It works less well when the "dispute" is over how many times you can be slapped before dessert.

Because here's the thing: mediation assumes both parties are negotiating on

with a government officer. The Women and Children Repression Prevention Act, 2000, was drafted precisely to bypass the foot-dragging of social compromise. It recognised that in cases of violence against women, every delay is an opportunity for threats, coercion, and "family honour" lectures from your in-laws. And yet here we are dressing up delay as due process. Of course, the official reasoning will be wrapped in the warm, fuzzy language

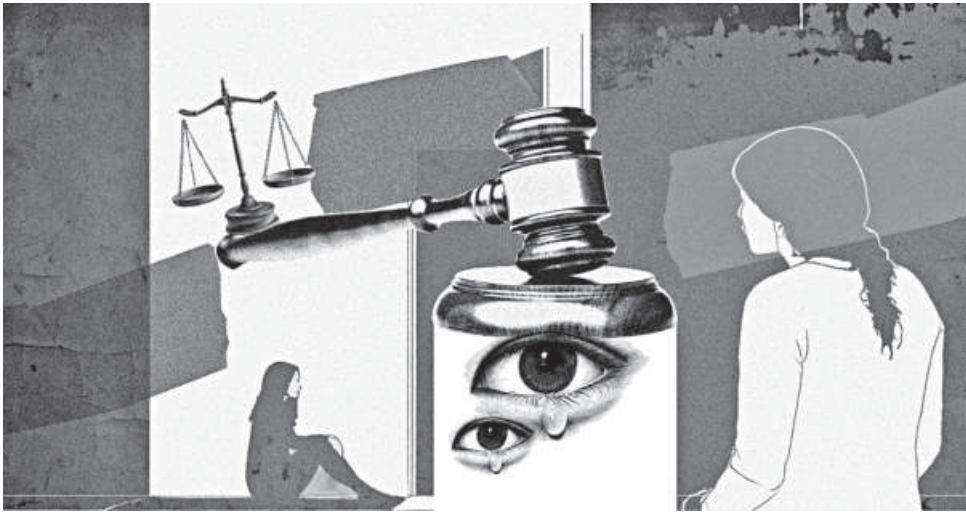
need better communication skills. Case closed!"

The absurdity would be funny if it weren't so dangerous. Dowry-related abuse is not a polite marital disagreement; it is a criminal act under Bangladeshi law. Section II(ga) is not there as a suggestion; it is a statutory recognition that "simple hurt" in dowry cases is serious enough to warrant direct prosecution. The ordinance, however, slyly

Rights, after all, are only as useful as the ease with which you can exercise them. And let's not forget the dangerous precedent: if mediation-before-prosecution becomes the norm in dowry abuse, why not extend it to other charming cultural traditions? Acid attacks? Arson over land disputes? A quick cuppa and a chat should do the trick. I can see the legal textbooks of the future now: *The Doctrine of Compulsory Forgiveness*, nestled comfortably between *Mens Rea* and *Natural Justice*. Law students will learn that in Bangladesh, justice is no longer blind; she's been sent for counselling before she can file an FIR.

Supporters of the change will no doubt point to "false cases" as the bogeyman. Yes, false allegations exist. But they are rare. And it is not unicorns that send thousands of women to hospital wards each year. The original law already allowed courts to dismiss frivolous cases. This amendment doesn't target false complaints—it targets all complaints, genuine or not. What's perhaps most galling is the timing. In a country where women's rights are already teetering between tokenism and tolerance, this ordinance is a step backwards disguised as procedural refinement. And because it's cloaked in the language of legal aid, the untrained ear might even believe it's progressive. It is not. It is the legal equivalent of a doctor telling you your broken leg will heal faster if you take a nice, long walk first.

So, here's my modest proposal: if we must have compulsory mediation in criminal acts against women, let's make it fair. Everyone who voted for it should first spend a weekend being "simply hurt" in the name of dowry and then see if they're in the mood for a polite chat. If they still think mediation is the best way forward, I'll personally draft the thank-you note to the legal aid officer. Until then, let's call this amendment what it is: a legal waiting room for women's justice, where time ticks away, bruises fade, and the only people truly protected are the ones holding the dowry receipts.



VISUAL: SALMAN SAKIB SHAHRYAR

of "reducing case backlogs" and "encouraging reconciliation". Because nothing says "healthy reconciliation" like a woman being told to patch things up with the man who bashed her head into the cabinet. I imagine the mediation script will go something like this:

Legal aid officer: "So, why do you think your husband hit you?"

Victim: "Because I didn't bring enough dowry."

Husband: "No, no, she misunderstood. I was merely expressing my cultural expectation through physical emphasis."

Officer: "Well, sounds like you two just

moves that first step behind a locked door labelled "Mediation Only". From a purely legal standpoint, this amendment undercuts the deterrent effect of the original act. Criminal law is supposed to send a message: commit this act, and you face swift, punitive consequences. By inserting mediation as a compulsory prelude, the state has effectively told perpetrators, "You've got one free round. Use it wisely."

It's also a triumph for the quiet backroom pressure of patriarchy. No need to lobby against women's rights openly—just tinker with the procedural requirements until the rights become too cumbersome to claim.

ambulance but still ruin your day (or life).

But that was too straightforward, wasn't it? In Bangladesh, we don't like our women rushing into rash things like bodily agency

equal footing. It's difficult to negotiate when one party is holding a legal baseball bat and the other is holding a police complaint that has now been reduced to a nice discourse

What can political parties learn from opinion polls?



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MD RUBAIYATH SARWAR

In Innovision's nationwide poll completed in March 2025, of the 10,696 people surveyed, 29.6 percent said they had not decided whom they would vote for. In contrast, BRAC Institute of Governance and Development's (BIGD) August 2025 survey found that 48.5 percent of their 5,495 respondents were undecided about their voting preference. Post-uprising, we thought that our nation would be uniting under a common hope: a reformed Bangladesh. Our polls are showing that voters are losing that hope. They also appear to be confused about whom they will vote for. The question is why?

BIGD did not ask a follow-up question to determine the underlying reasons for voters' indecision, but Innovision's March 2025 poll did. First, we found that a higher percentage of urban voters are undecided (urban 35 percent, rural 27 percent). Second, a higher proportion of Gen Z and Millennial voters are undecided when compared to other generations (Gen Z 33.64 percent, Millennials

28.06 percent, Gen X 25.53 percent, Boomers II 25.99 percent, Boomers I 26.00 percent, Post War 21.25 percent). Also note, 52 percent of Hindu voters, as opposed to 37 percent of Muslim voters, were undecided in the March 2025 poll. We also found that residents of pucca households were more undecided (45 percent), as opposed to those living in jhupri (37 percent). This means that the relatively wealthier families were more undecided. Besides, 52 percent of the ethnic voters were undecided, in contrast to 38 percent of Bangalee voters. The share of undecided voters was higher among students, petty traders, and homemakers.

When asked, 49.3 percent of the undecided voters cited not knowing who the candidate would be as a reason for their indecision. Meanwhile, 33.9 percent of them said they would make decisions based on the political situation before the election. Also, 14.5 percent of them were not thinking of the election and 9.7 percent of the undecided

voters did not trust mainstream political parties. To understand whether doubt about Awami League's election participation impacted the voters' decision not to vote, we had a proxy, and it was revealed that 6.1 percent were undecided because they were unsure whether their preferred party would participate in the election. Of the rest, 3.7 percent said they do not see any alternative political parties and 6.5 percent refused to comment. Note that 10.3 percent of the Gen Z voters said they do not trust mainstream political parties, in contrast to only 3.95 percent of Gen X voters. Besides, 4.2 percent of Gen Z said they are undecided because they do not see any alternative political parties. Also, a higher percentage of urban undecided voters (12.1 percent) compared to rural voters (5.3 percent) mistrust mainstream political parties.

The results of the Innovision survey show that our voters want to know who their candidates are. The political parties have so far failed to disclose their preferred candidates. Jamaat has already put forward a list of candidates, unofficially. But BNP has kept us in the dark in this matter, while the NCP is still organising itself. In this election, voters are asking for candidates who will work for them, on their behalf. The parties must engage with the voters and talk to them before finalising their candidates. Just using the party's name will not be enough to win this election. We also asked the respondents how they decide whom to vote for, and 21.6

percent responded that they always vote for the same party, 8.6 percent said they vote for a different party every election. However, 38.1 percent of the respondents said they make the decision based on the performance of the previous candidate. This means voters will be assessing the historical background of nominated candidates to assess their credibility. So, new candidates must break through the baggage left behind by their predecessors.

The data is clear. If the next election is free and fair, then the parties must now race to win the voters' hearts. That heart, however, has hardened, and it is bruised. If the parties think their old tactics would work, they would be wrong. So, how do the parties gain voters' trust ahead of the election?

The solution depends on both political parties' higher-ups and local leaders, or the aspiring nominees. During a recent field visit near the Sundarbans, I saw men in their mid-50s and 60s congregating at a local tea stall at 5:30pm. The tea stall owner switched on Somoy TV channel on YouTube. I was surprised to see how these common people from one of the remotest areas in the country were gathering information online through a private TV channel. I was also startled to see how all the news headlines sounded like BNP is creating chaos by not agreeing with several reform proposals. BNP will be in a fool's paradise if they think they can easily win the next election with a landslide given the concerns about its grassroots activities

among many people. The same theory applies to NCP as well. These parties must conduct a critical self-reflection. People want to move ahead from the old political culture of violence and control. Jamaat is benefiting from the chaos that BNP and NCP are in, and seems better organised, but it is still not above self-reflection given the changing demands of the time.

We, the people of Bangladesh, want a free and fair election. We want a parliament where there is a balance in power between the opposition and the government. We want the opposition and the government to work as a group for the common interest of Bangladesh. We do not want an opposition that will resort to street violence from day one, after the election, and declare that they will not cooperate with the government. Such an opposition party, in my opinion, is no less fascist than the ruling party we saw before. We want a government that listens to the opposition. We want a government that takes the opposition and the civil society as partners in building the nation. A ruling party that suppresses the opposition's voice in the parliament and remains in denial mode is something the people of Bangladesh have already ousted.

I request all political parties to listen to the people. The opinion polls are giving you insights that you otherwise failed to gather through your own apparatus. This is the gift from the people of Bangladesh to you. Make good use of them.

CROSSWORD
BY THOMAS JOSEPH

ACROSS

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- Aids in crime
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- Extend, as a subscription
- Kansas capital
- By way of
- Pub drinks
- Natural gift
- Homer's neighbor
- Tool kit tool
- Painting holder
- Some silverware
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- Mine yield
- Texas capital
- Full of caffeine, perhaps
- "Don't cry over - milk"
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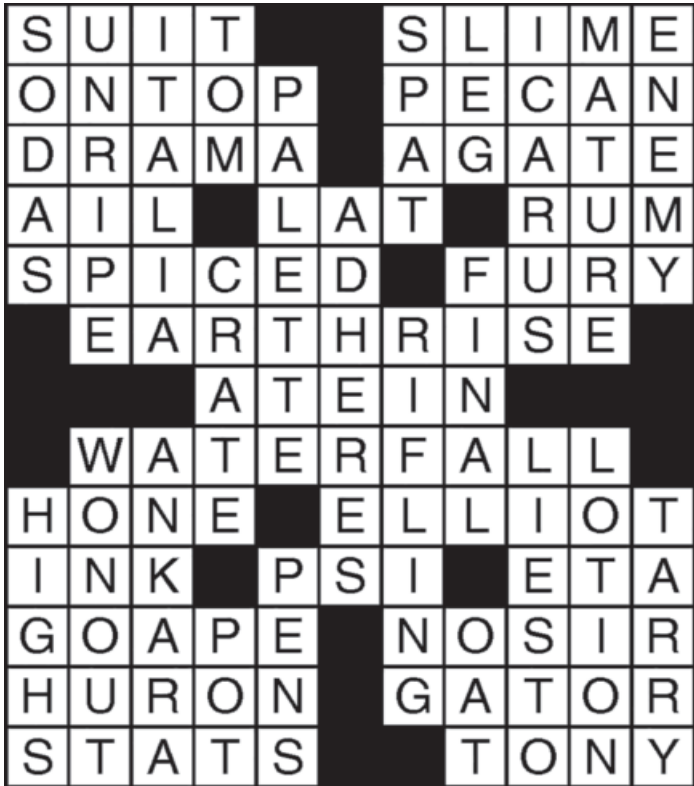
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- Gofer's work
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- Lincoln nickname
- Colorado capital
- Beer hall vessels
- Moon of Saturn
- Try for a fly
- Georgia capital
- Goals
- Director Spike
- NFL players
- Gift tag word
- Cry of terror
- South Dakota capital
- On the go
- Mine yield
- photographer
- Superman's adoptive family
- Hamlet
- Jellied dish
- Meat-rating org.
- Genesis woman
- Cozy retreat



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YESTERDAY'S ANSWERS



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