

## Women in DUCSU race sparks hope

But their overall political participation in DU, JU is still low

Ten women vying for top positions in the upcoming Dhaka University Central Students' Union (DUCSU) election is a welcome change for women's political participation in Bangladesh. Although women, especially students, have always been at the forefront of major revolutions, including the recent July uprising, their political leadership at the national level has long been undermined by the prevailing dynastic political culture, and most top positions have been held by men. Even the last two DUCSU elections, in 2019 and 1990, saw very few or no women contesting for top posts. And in independent Bangladesh, no woman has yet held the vice-president (VP) or general secretary (GS) position. Against that backdrop, this year's DUCSU election is significant: five women are competing for the VP post, one for GS, and four for assistant general secretary.

However, the overall number of female candidates in both DUCSU and the Jahangirnagar University Central Students' Union (JUCSU) polls remains low compared to male candidates, although the final lists have yet to be confirmed. So far, 402 male candidates have been cleared for 28 DUCSU posts, compared to only 60 women. Similarly, for JUCSU's 25 posts, 276 nominations have been filed, of which only 57 are women. And of them, 43 are for six reserved seats for women. What is more disappointing is that no female candidate at JUCSU is running for VP. Although registered female voters in both universities are nearly equal in number to male voters, when it comes to actual political participation, women remain sidelined. Not surprisingly, student wings of major political parties reflect their parent parties' attitude towards female representation. For instance, the panels of Jatiotabadi Chatradal, Islami Chhatra Shibir, and Islami Chhatra Andolok have not nominated any women for DUCSU's top three posts. At JUCSU, the Jatiotabadi Chatradal and Islami Chhatra Shibir-backed slates nominated female students only for reserved seats.

While these party wings have failed to create space for women leaders, other factors also discourage female participation in campus politics. This is evident from the low number of nominations from female halls at Jahangirnagar University, leaving many posts uncontested at the female dormitories. According to a report in this daily, several female leaders from last year's mass uprising are absent from the JUCSU ballot. Many of them feel undervalued post-uprising. Cyberbullying, harassment, family restrictions, and a lack of inclusive, female-friendly campuses have also contributed to this disengagement.

Despite the obstacles, Umama Fatema, SK Tasnim Afroz Emi and their comrades in the fight for female leadership are not backing down. We applaud their resilience and hope that, if elected, they will work to fulfil their electoral promises and help build an inclusive, non-partisan, safe campus for all students.

## Protect women, girls from climate crisis

Early marriage, gender-based violence rise during climate shocks

We cannot overstate the urgency of addressing the gendered impact of climate change in Bangladesh. A recent study has revealed alarming figures from climate-vulnerable districts like Khulna and Sathkhira: over 60 percent of adolescent girls lack access to menstrual health products, only 2.5 percent of households have consistent access to sexual and reproductive health services, and 72 percent rely on unsafe, saline-contaminated drinking water. Beyond these gaps in basic needs, the climate crisis has also deepened gender inequalities in these areas. The same study found that 78 percent of women reported an increased risk of gender-based violence during disasters, while economic distress is fuelling child and early marriages. These trends are not only distressing but also a violation of fundamental human rights.

The study, conducted by Plan International Bangladesh, paints a grim picture of how climate emergencies intensify health, education, and security vulnerabilities. Girls are dropping out of school due to a lack of menstrual hygiene support or because they spend hours fetching water. Families, pushed to the brink by crop failures and job losses, are marrying off their daughters early or sending them into unsafe migration routes. Similar concerns were documented after Cyclone Amphan, when UN Women reported a 65 percent surge in gender-based violence, and ActionAid found that 71 percent of respondents experienced more abuse during disasters. Despite such evidence, national climate policies remain largely gender-neutral, ignoring these recurring and well-documented risks.

Therefore, the government must adopt a gender-responsive legal and policy framework to address these challenges. Current disaster management and climate laws and policies, including the Bangladesh Climate Change Strategy and Action Plan, 2009 and the Climate Change Trust Act, 2010, need urgent revision to incorporate protection for women and girls. Legislation should explicitly recognise gender-based violence, harassment, trafficking, and forced marriage as aggravated risks during displacement and disasters. Existing laws should be amended to cover climate-induced vulnerabilities, while mechanisms for victim support and speedy prosecutions must be strengthened.

On the ground, gender-sensitive infrastructure is essential. This includes safe, women-only cyclone shelters, secure water access points, and expanded menstrual hygiene management through schools and community networks. Disaster-prone areas must have access to reproductive and mental healthcare resources delivered by trained professionals, as well as social protection prioritising widows, single mothers, and women with disabilities. At the same time, investment in women-led adaptation initiatives, such as desalination projects and climate-smart agriculture, can help ensure livelihoods and reduce dependency on harmful coping strategies like early marriage.

## THIS DAY IN HISTORY

### First COVID-19 vaccine approved

On this day in 2021, the US Food and Drug Administration (FDA) approved the first COVID-19 vaccine. It was known as the Pfizer-BioNTech COVID-19 Vaccine, and initially marketed as Comirnaty.

# EDITORIAL

## DOMESTIC VIOLENCE IN BANGLADESH

# When numbers speak of the silence



### NO STRINGS ATTACHED

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### AASHA MEHREEN AMIN

Numbers always have an effect. The larger the number, the greater the impact on the human psyche. So when we are informed that 133 women have been killed by their husbands in the first seven months of 2025, it is no longer just a number—it's a punch in the stomach that leaves us sickened and reeling. Because these women were murdered in what should have been their safest place, their homes, by the very person they were told they could trust the most, their life partner.

But why do these numbers still shock us? Is it because we didn't realise the extent of this horrific crime? Or is it because deep down we have accepted a lie, that violence within marriage is a "private affair" and to an extent not that big of a deal? So deep is this normalisation that when women cry out for help, they are often told to "bear with it," for the sake of their children, for their families' "honour," for financial survival. Ultimately, that phrase—to "just bear with it"—becomes a death sentence.

On August 13 this year, 26-year-old Syeda Fahmida Keya was allegedly killed by her husband Sifat Ali. According to Keya's family, the eldest of their four children, who is 11 years old, told them how it happened. That night, Fahmida was preparing dinner when Sifat returned home. An argument began and Sifat began to hit her, apparently a usual occurrence in that household. Sifat forced her into a room and locked the door. At around 2am, Sifat called Keya's family and asked them to come home quickly, saying she was "seriously ill." He directed them first to the Dhaka Medical College Hospital and then to a private hospital in Panthapath, where they found that their beloved daughter was dead. Keya's husband fled, leaving her body at the hospital.

We don't know whether the family tried to save Keya from what seems to be regular abuse, by offering to take her in with her children. Perhaps she herself, for the sake of her children, decided to "bear with it."

From the news reports, we don't know much about her in-laws. Did they turn a blind eye to their son's

violent behaviour? Or like many, did they unquestioningly side with their son?

According to statistics from Ain o Salish Kendra (ASK), between January and July this year, 42 women were killed by their in-laws and 33 by their own family members. A recent report by The Daily Star states that between January and August 15 this year, the national emergency helpline 999

It is a system upheld by a society where patriarchy is built into every institution—cultural, political, economic, and legal. Domestic violence is still dismissed as a "family affair." Thus, a woman who wants to leave an abusive marriage is trapped by fear: the fear of losing her children; of knowing that she has nowhere to escape as her family is unwilling or unable to help her; that state support is practically absent; of her financial dependence on her abusive spouse. There are few shelters and even fewer long-term solutions. Plus, there is always the looming threat that if she does leave, her abuser might come after her to finish what he started.

In this society, where women are seen as lesser beings by both the state and the community, where wife-beaters walk free, the death toll will

clear: take the first step.

Unfortunately, many women do not get to take that first step. These are the women who need support from their own families, communities, and the state through support systems that include shelters, legal aid, employment, and protection from violent spouses after they have been convicted.

Every time a man hits his wife, something dies within the woman. Her trust. Her dignity. Her sense of security. Children that have witnessed such violence carry the scars too. This includes emotional trauma, low self-worth, depression, and even a learned cycle of violence where they become abusers. And what about the abusers? How can a man be termed "normal" if he feels in control by hurting his partner? Why do we treat him as such? The 133 women who will never



VISUAL: SHAIKH SULTANA JAHAN BADHON

received 17,341 calls about violence against women, including 9,394 calls specifically reporting abuse by husbands.

A Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics (BBS) survey in 2024 revealed something equally horrifying: 70 percent of the 27,476 women surveyed said they had experienced at least one form of abuse—physical, sexual, emotional, economic or controlling behaviour—with only 64 percent never disclosing the abuse and only 7.4 percent seeking legal action.

not go down. It will rise, because the system is working exactly as it was designed to.

By some strange coincidence, a few days ago, I was watching Budh (Awakening), a film by Prashant Ingole about three women in different corners of India. It gives a picture of what many marriages are for women: a prison and lifetime of servitude. These women are humiliated, commodified, made powerless. But in the end, each of them reaches a breaking point and starts to resist. The film's message is

tell their stories have left behind 133 broken families. We will never know the intensity of the fear they faced each day, each night, how helpless they felt or how much pain they endured before their lives were snuffed out forever. Add to that the pain of hundreds of other women living through this nightmare right now. The children who watch silently, petrified, witnessing every scream, every slap, every silence. If we could add up all these sufferings, how gut-wrenching a number would that be?

## Why the reproductive autonomy of women must be ensured



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### SELM JAHAN

Bangladesh's population has been estimated to be 17.55 crore, half of whom are women. The United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA) disclosed this estimation in July in its annual flagship publication, the State of World Population 2025. Given that the global population currently stands at 823 crore, the population of Bangladesh accounts for two percent of the global total. Furthermore, the average life expectancy of both men and women in Bangladesh is now higher than the global averages. While the global male life expectancy is 71 years, for Bangladeshi men, it is 74 years. Similarly, the female life expectancy in Bangladesh is 77 years, while its global average is 76 years. The report highlights several key demographic implications.

First, with two-thirds of the population (11.5 crore) in the 15-64 working age bracket, Bangladesh has an opportunity to leverage a demographic dividend. However, this group must support a growing elderly population—seven percent or 1.2 crore aged 65 and over—who are living longer, which has monetary and caregiving implications, particularly for women.

Second, adolescents make up

about 20 percent or 3.3 crore people in the country. They represent a big proportion of the dependency ratio and thus are to be supported by the rest of the population. The broader youth cohort—nearly five crore—makes up 28 percent of the population. On one hand, they can reap the benefits of the demographic dividend as they can be the driving force for creativity and innovation for development. On the other hand, if these young people are not turned into human capital and productively employed, they can swell Bangladesh's current unemployment pool of 27 lakh. At present, the youth unemployment rate ranges between 10-12 percent, much higher than the overall unemployment rate in the country.

Thirdly, Bangladesh has achieved a replacement-level total fertility rate of 2.1. Despite this, challenges such as high rates of adolescent pregnancy, driven by early marriage and limited access to reproductive health education, persist.

The theme of the UNFPA's report is "The Real Family Crisis - The Pursuit of Reproductive Agency in a Changing World." It challenges the dominant narrative of "too many" or "too few births" and argues that the real crisis

is not about numbers; rather, it is a crisis of reproductive agency. However, in Bangladesh's context, both these narratives are meaningful and relevant. The total population of Bangladesh is a concern from two angles. First, given the land size of the country, its population density is the highest among countries with population of over 10 million. Over the past 50 years, the population of Bangladesh has more than doubled, but the country's land area has remained the same.

The issue of reproductive agency is also important. People, especially women and young people in Bangladesh, are unable to realise their reproductive intentions due to systematic, economic and social barriers. About 77 percent of women in the country are unable to make their own decisions about childbearing, significantly higher than the global average of 63 percent. Similarly, only 23 percent of Bangladeshi women have been able to achieve their desired number of children, while the global average is 37 percent. These numbers reflect the absence of reproductive autonomy of Bangladeshi women, which is due to a series of factors ranging from economic dependency, lack of education and healthcare, social pressure and above all, patriarchy.

Unintended pregnancies are widespread in Bangladesh, and the reasons are varied. About 11 percent of the Bangladeshi women cannot make independent decisions on contraception, 16 percent have been pressured to have a child against their will, and 15 percent were pressured to use contraception, even when they

wanted a child. Another 10 percent were unable to access essential healthcare services, while one in every three women stated that they were unable to refuse sexual intercourse. As a result, 33 percent of women in the country experienced unintended pregnancies. Social and gender norms continue to pressure girls into early marriage and motherhood. All these contribute to the unpaid care work burden, gender-based violence and further deterioration of women's reproductive autonomy. On the other hand, economic hardship, high healthcare costs, and unaffordable childcare, lack of paid parental leave, force many families to delay and even forego parenthood.

Enhancing the reproductive autonomy of Bangladeshi women will have to be supported with essential reproductive health services, a robust midwifery workforce, and a steady supply of medicines and contraceptives. It would also require comprehensive sex education, affordable housing, affordable child care and paid parental leave. All these would need more public resources devoted to the health sector. The current allocation of 0.7 percent of GDP and two percent of the national budget to health expenditures is simply unacceptable, not only by the global standard, but also by the regional standard. They must be raised to at least five percent of GDP and 15 percent of the national budget. Let us ensure that reproductive decisions in Bangladesh are supported, and not judged and let every person in the country plan their life with choice, freedom, safety and dignity.