

## Stop the chaos over constituency redesign

Electoral boundary disputes must be resolved peacefully

The ongoing unrest surrounding the Election Commission's constituency boundary changes sends a worrying signal not just about the unchecked deterioration of law and order but also about the prospects for a smooth lead-up to the February election in today's charged atmosphere. On September 4, the EC issued a gazette notification redrawing the boundaries of 46 constituencies across the country. Since then, protests, blockades, and clashes have erupted in several districts, including Bhanga in Faridpur, Bagerhat, and Bera in Pabna. Putting aside the more contentious, RPO related developments, if even technical matters such as this one can trigger violent outbursts, what hope is there of maintaining peace during the election itself?

Bhanga upazila has particularly emerged as an epicentre of the trouble brewing over constituency re-demarcation. Opposing the EC's decision to transfer Algi and Hamirdi unions from Faridpur 4 to Faridpur 2, protesters on Monday stormed and vandalised the Bhanga Upazila Parishad complex, Bhanga Police Station, and several other government offices, torching 11 motorcycles and damaging at least five police vehicles. The unrest also left highways connecting 21 southern districts nearly paralysed. Eyewitnesses said over a thousand people, mostly young, took part in the violence, many with their faces covered and some wearing helmets and carrying sticks and machetes. It was a total mayhem, with police officials trying to control the situation forced to take shelter inside a mosque at one point.

While no major disturbance was reported in Bhanga on Tuesday, the possibility of renewed violence remains. Meanwhile, in Bagerhat, the reduction of four parliamentary seats to three prompted marches, sit-ins, and a continuing siege of the district EC office, with two petitions filed in High Court demanding restoration of the previous constituencies. In Pabna's Bera, protesters on Sunday enforced a hartal and blockade of both road and river routes. This was the latest in a series of protests since the EC designated Santhia as the sole area under Pabna-1 while merging Bera and Sujanagar into Pabna 2. These protests, causing significant disruptions to public life, may continue unless the disputes are resolved.

This issue, we must say, is as much political as it is administrative. While the political appeal for a return to the pre-2008 constituency structure may seem convincing in certain cases, the manner in which local political actors mobilised and provoked violence is totally unacceptable. In this regard, we may recall BNP's reported stance to refrain from protests, demonstrations, and blockades opposing the EC's final gazette, but local BNP units, among other parties, have been heavily involved in some of the incidents, raising doubt about the party's commitment or control over grassroots leaders. We urge political parties to strictly enforce discipline so that any grievance is expressed only through lawful means.

At the same time, the EC must try harder to resolve the disputes through better engagement with the aggrieved parties. While electoral boundary changes are normal given the changes in population and other administrative considerations, the commission must be open to revising them so that any adjustments are understood and accepted by local stakeholders. But under no circumstances can violence be tolerated.

## Make the most out of industrial parks

Resolve the issues to make Barishal BSCIC park fully functional

It is an irony that, amid persistent unemployment, an industrial park with the potential to create 50,000 jobs remains underutilised due to decades of infrastructural neglect. The Bangladesh Small and Cottage Industries Corporation (BSCIC) estate in Barishal, one of the earliest industrial parks established in 1960, still lacks an industrial gas connection even after six decades. Built on a 131-acre industrial site, the estate comprises 470 plots: 377 allocated to various businesses, and 93 remaining vacant. Of the allocated plots, only 115 have fully active production units. The rest include shuttered factories or ones with limited, intermittent production.

One reason the estate has failed to attract investors is the high production costs. Many factories rely on cylinder gas, which increases production costs. Additionally, the lack of industrial clustering—geographical proximity of interconnected businesses—fails to attract buyers, according to some factory owners. They also point out that the limited number of flights at Barishal airport—only one per day to and from Dhaka—discourages potential buyers. Additionally, businesses have to travel to Khulna for VAT related matters as the divisional office is still located there.

The neglect of this BSCIC park is evident. Until recently, it lacked basic facilities like boundary walls, security services, and a proper drainage system. Media reports from last year also highlighted the lack of an uninterrupted power supply, a dedicated fire service, and a health centre for workers. After the opening of Padma Bridge, which improved road connectivity with the southern part of the country, there was hope that Barishal BSCIC would finally become a vibrant industrial hub. However, the slow pace of infrastructural development continues to be a barrier for potential investors. As a result, new jobs are not being created, and the government is losing crores in potential revenue.

Underutilisation of industrial parks is not new in Bangladesh. Past political governments invested huge sums to build estates without proper planning or supporting infrastructure. For instance, BSCIC has 82 estates with 11,271 allocated plots and 6,200 production units. However, only 4,704 units are in production, employing roughly six lakh people. Given the land scarcity in Bangladesh, the BSCIC should have a higher utilisation rate. Therefore, we urge the government to prioritise the proper development of existing industrial estates before taking on new projects. Businesses should be given appropriate incentives to relocate to these parks. And infrastructure development should generate long-term economic benefits such as jobs and revenue, not just political capital.

## EDITORIAL

## Women's unpaid work deserves respect and fair recognition

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As per a recent survey report made public on September 9, in Bangladesh, unpaid work overall was valued at Tk 670,000 crore in 2021, which was equivalent to 18.9 percent of the country's GDP. Of that work, women performed 85 percent—equivalent to Tk 570,000 crore or 16.14 percent of GDP. The survey was conducted by the Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics (BBS) and UN Women Bangladesh, with support from the global Women Count programme and technical assistance from the Asian Development Bank (ADB). The survey, the first ever Household Production Satellite Account (HPSA), drew on data from the Time Use Survey 2021 and Labour Force Survey (LFS) 2022.

The report follows on the pledge made by the current government in the FY2025-26 budget to integrate unpaid labour into official GDP calculations. However, this is the result of many years of advocacy and lobbying by women's and development organisations to monetise women's unpaid work and give it a formal recognition. This is a landmark step in favour of millions of women who perform essential services yet remain out of the national accounting system.

Efforts to ascribe a monetary value to women's unpaid care and household work have been a topic of global discussion over the last few decades. An Oxfam report released in 2019, before the commencement of the World Economic Forum's (WEF) annual meeting, states that unpaid work done by women across the globe amounts to \$10 trillion a year—43 times the annual turnover of Apple, the world's biggest company!

In Bangladesh, this effort has been spearheaded by researchers and several organisations, such as Manusher Jonno Foundation (MJF), Bangladesh Mahila Parishad, Oxfam, ActionAid, etc. The earliest recorded comprehensive research on women's

unpaid care work in Bangladesh was conducted by M Hamid in 1996, which used the replacement cost valuation method to estimate its economic value. The pilot Time Use Survey was conducted by the BBS in 2012, followed by the first national Time Use Survey in 2021, supported by UN Women.

Meanwhile, the demand grew for not only ascribing monetary value to unpaid care work but for according it a formal recognition by including it in the national GDP calculations. This demand was met with scepticism by economists who explained that GDP is calculated using the international standard method called System of National Accounts (SNA), and products not marketed cannot be included in it.

Meanwhile, a study conducted in 2014 by the Centre for Policy Dialogue (CPD) for MJF revealed that, on an average, a female member of a household undertakes 12.1 non-SNA activities, while the corresponding figure for a male member is only 2.7. Using the replacement method, the study goes on to summarise that if women's unpaid work were to be monetised, it would amount to 2.5 to 2.9 times higher than the income of women received from paid work.

In our search to find a solution to the SNA issue, we came across examples from countries such as Mexico, India and South Africa, which have used satellite accounts to calculate women's unpaid care work and have successfully shown its estimation in their GDP calculations.

The BBS survey is a critical effort to give value to women who work

Shekha poster from "My wife does not work" to "Yes, my wife works; in fact, she works more than I do!" The definition of work is that if you get remuneration, it is work, and if you don't, then it is not work but tasks you are supposed to perform. Who performs these unaccounted, unrecognised tasks? Women, of course. As per the Time Use Survey 2021, women spend 7.3 times more time on unpaid household and care work than men. Despite being essential to the well-being of the family, this work has largely remained invisible and outside national accounts.

However, merely calculating the monetary value of unpaid care and household work is not enough. It is only the first step towards the long journey of achieving equal rights and status of women within households and society. The BBS report has put forward a number of recommendations which should be implemented if women are to gain from this pathbreaking survey. First, an inter-ministerial mechanism should be set up to integrate unpaid work into laws and policies, prioritising care in the national budget for sustained financing as well as regular data collection. Most importantly, however, we have to challenge social norms and practices that undervalue household work and sees it only as "women's work." For this, massive campaigns and dissemination strategies are needed to spread the findings of this report and emphasise the contribution of women in all its dimensions. There is an urgent need to recognise, reduce and redistribute care work to free up women to undertake activities and tasks of their choice.

Finally, we indeed want more and more women to develop skills and enter the job market for employment, and that employment has to ensure a living wage, and be decent and secure. However, the reality in Bangladesh, especially the rural areas, is that millions of women will remain at home, either by choice or compulsion, performing essential services, silently, behind the scene, contributing to the harmony and well-being of their families. It is to those women that we pay our respect, and hope this BBS report, through implementation of its recommendations, will succeed in enhancing their status within their families and contribute to creating a more gender-equal and just society.

## How Bangladesh can build its trade negotiation capabilities

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International trade has long transcended the mere exchange of goods and services. It has evolved into a powerful instrument for fostering economic cooperation among nations. Today's global trading system, anchored in agreed rules and regulations, provides a framework for countries to engage in meaningful negotiations at bilateral, regional, and multilateral levels. Trade, and by extension trade negotiations, are not purely commercial endeavours; they are deeply intertwined with domestic socioeconomic and political priorities that must be reconciled with mutually beneficial outcomes with trading partners.

Historically, Bangladesh has benefited from preferential, duty-free access to several markets, which limited the need for extensive trade negotiations. However, as the country prepares to graduate from the group of least developed countries (LDCs) in 2026, there is growing urgency to secure preferential trade agreements, diversify the export basket, and enhance trade competitiveness. Although preferential treatment will continue for three years after graduation, Bangladesh must proactively pursue trade agreements that ensure favourable market access while also strengthening its export competitiveness.

The next generation of trade policies must aim to expand Bangladesh's footprint in global value chains and gradually phase out domestic protective measures. Crafting such policies is a demanding exercise—requiring rigorous economic, financial,

and social analysis, clarity of purpose, and a careful balance between technocratic precision and factors of political economy. Trade policy must reflect the realities of a nearly half-trillion-dollar economy, vastly different from the early 1990s when ready-made garment exports started to rise.

Currently, the domestic trade and tariff discourse in Bangladesh remains narrowly focused on immediate concerns, such as tariff reductions and public revenue impacts. While these issues are valid, the policy calculus must also account for potential spillovers—such as financial inflows, technology transfer, and increased competition—that can benefit domestic industries. Moreover, comparative and competitive advantage analysis should be forward-looking with a view to structural changes in the economy. All these considerations can shape the contours of future trade negotiations.

Bangladesh must also contend with a resurgence of industrial policies being adopted by emerging and high-income countries to boost competitiveness and advance strategic interests. Although not conclusive, there is evidence that well-designed protection measures, such as industrial policies in developing countries, can be effective, provided these are targeted and time-bound. A lesson from this growing body of

practice. Trade negotiations demand a mastery of complex rules and a deep understanding of products and services. This is especially relevant given the rise of intermediate goods in global supply chains and the growing importance of services, including digital services that cross borders in virtual space.

Exporters must also meet decarbonisation targets and comply with environmental, social, and governance (ESG) standards. These, for example, include the EU's Carbon Border Adjustment Mechanism (CBAM) and Generalized Scheme of Preferences (GSP+). International buyers are increasingly demanding products that meet environmental

and labour standards and are aligned with circular economy guidelines. Technical proficiency in trade analytics alone is not enough. Negotiators must also possess interpersonal skills, including cultural sensitivity, as trade talks often involve engagement with counterparts from diverse backgrounds. Understanding cultural norms and values can be pivotal in building rapport and trust.

Given the complexity of trade agreements, negotiators also require robust support systems to crystallise issues and priorities that can underpin strategy and tactics. The support should come from multidisciplinary teams capable of conducting economic and social cost-benefit scanning. There are analytical tools available that can be customised and used to reduce the burden of extensive research and modelling. As Bangladesh explores new export destinations and deepens its economic diplomacy, trade negotiation capabilities must be treated as a long-term national endeavour that demands investment not only in human skills but also in institutional mechanisms to internalise learning.

A two-layered system comprising a national pool of trade experts and negotiators with representatives from government, non-state actors, such as think tanks, the private sector, and civil society, can serve as knowledge bank. The national pool should have a strong interface with the Ministry of Commerce, which typically leads trade negotiations on behalf of the government. The trade negotiators' pool should receive strategic backstopping through an organisational mechanism, ensuring continuity, coordination, and institutional memory. With the formal launch of the Trade Negotiators Pool, supported by the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) and the UK government, Bangladesh is already taking steps to institutionalise national capabilities. This momentous must be sustained.