

# Save children from sexual exploitation

## Holistic actions needed to prevent child trafficking, sex trade

Our society's failure to ensure a safe and secure childhood for children—especially girls—continues to be reflected in various statistics, whether on child labour, physical or sexual violence, or commercial sexual exploitation of children. Unfortunately, these figures often remain just numbers as policymakers, politicians, and public institutions fail to take meaningful action or allocate sufficient resources based on the findings. One such alarming statistic was shared at a recent event, where the International Justice Mission, an anti-slavery organisation, estimated that 20 to 50 percent of Bangladesh's sex trade involves minors. The estimate draws on several recent studies.

For instance, a 2024 study by Freedom Fund on Dhaka's sex workers found that 22 percent of both street-based and brothel-based sex workers are under 17. The US State Department's 2023 *Trafficking in Persons Report: Bangladesh* estimated that 30,000 girls became victims of child sex trafficking across the country. Climate migration and poverty often make children vulnerable to sex traffickers, pushing them towards the trade not just in brothels and streets but also in hotels, spas, massage parlours, and private homes.

In fact, a UNICEF report on Bangladesh last year noted that more than 34 lakh children live in "street-situations" without parental care. While they are more vulnerable to sex traders, many girls growing up with parental care, too, may become victim because of child marriage. Young girls escaping abusive marriages also often fall prey to traffickers. Most victims do not have the choice of refusal, as that often ends in serious consequences, including physical, sexual and emotional violence, along with deprivation of basic needs.

Despite this grave threat, our policy response remains minimal. Law enforcers seem more focused on controlling political unrest, for example, than on apprehending sex traffickers and individuals running sex trades. Broader policies aimed at addressing poverty and climate migration are inadequate. Social safety net benefits often fall short of ensuring sustainable livelihoods and frequently fail to reach the most vulnerable populations. Child marriage continues to be a problem among vulnerable and marginalised communities, with Bangladesh having the highest prevalence rate in all of South Asia. Meanwhile, legal loopholes, systemic barriers, and low convictions of cases filed under the Women and Children Repression Prevention Act embolden criminals involved in sex trades.

Simultaneously, the lack of safe and well-equipped shelter homes for trafficking survivors and street children leaves many continuously vulnerable to exploitation. Add to this the danger of online sexual exploitation. Though the previous government had tools to monitor social media activity, these were rarely used effectively to catch online offenders or recruitment networks. Under the circumstances, we can only hope that the current and future governments will place child safety at the forefront—by enforcing existing laws, innovating policy, and implementing holistic, long-term solutions to end child sex trafficking and ensure every child's right to a safe, secure life.

# Solve the manpower crisis

## Upazila health complex expansion will be futile without required manpower

We are concerned by the health authorities' decision to expand the capacity of nine upazila health complexes without addressing the existing manpower shortage at these facilities. The Health Services Division (HSD) has reportedly approved increasing the number of beds from 31 to 50 in eight complexes, and from 50 to 100 in the remaining one. This move comes in response to the overwhelming pressure of patients at these facilities. While the need for expansion is understandable, it raises a critical question: what purpose will this expansion serve if additional manpower is not recruited and essential equipment is not procured simultaneously?

Our upazila health complexes have long been grappling with a severe shortage of doctors, nurses, and essential staff, which severely disrupts their day-to-day services. The lack of manpower is also linked to mismanagement and inefficiency in these facilities. Moreover, absenteeism and a lack of specialist doctors have been a major barrier to providing treatment to rural people, many of whom are forced to seek treatment at district or medical college hospitals, which puts an extra burden on them. According to an estimate by the Directorate General of Health Services (DGHS), around 59 percent of doctor positions in upazila health complexes currently remain vacant. All nine hospitals awaiting expansion are also operating with fewer doctors and nurses than the approved number of posts. For instance, the Nikli Upazila Health Complex in Kishoreganj is operating with only four doctors against 17 sanctioned posts, while in Jashore's Chowgachha Upazila Health Complex, only 10 doctors are working against 32 sanctioned positions. A similar situation prevails in the other seven facilities.

We, therefore, hope that the authorities will show the same urgency in recruiting staff as they did in deciding to expand the health complexes. Currently, due to the involvement of multiple agencies, the process of recruiting manpower takes a long time. This process needs to be simplified and expedited. It is, however, noteworthy that the appointment process for 3,000 doctors is underway, and more doctors are expected to be recruited through regular and specialised BCS examinations. In the meantime, the health authorities can temporarily assign doctors to the facilities that are struggling to deal with the pressure of patients. Nevertheless, in the long term, a better mechanism is needed to address doctor shortages. Improving the services of upazila health complexes in terms of manpower, equipment and capacity should be carried out comprehensively to ensure proper, affordable and accessible healthcare for the rural and marginalised communities of the country.

# Can justice be dispensed in an unjust manner?

## Role of the judges is critical



THE THIRD VIEW

Mahfuz Anam  
is the editor and publisher of  
The Daily Star.

MAHFUZ ANAM

When judges give preference to the letter of the law and ignore the spirit of the law, they, knowingly or unknowingly, violate the law's main purpose, which is to serve justice.

When we want changes in a hurry, we don't think much about the methods, hence the changes don't last. When we want to dispense justice in a big way but don't pay attention to legal details or the due process, then fairness, a precondition of justice, is not assured. When we want to punish culprits en masse but don't allow much scope for the accused's rights, it smacks of vengeance. This creates doubt about the credibility of the legal process and its outcome in the public mind.

We forget the age-old saying: "Justice must not only be done but also be seen to be done." The obligation is clear: in punishing all those who break the law, we cannot break the law. In holding abusers of power accountable, we cannot abuse power ourselves. The truth is, justice can never be established in an unjust manner.

We are currently witnessing a severe abuse of the law. Bring a few people together and create a mob, and you are above the law. Even the sight of people being beaten to death does not seem to nudge the government's conscience. Use some keywords to denigrate an institution or a person, and you don't have to bother about facts. People are being charged with murder, arrested, and kept in jail without trial or bail, in some cases for more than a year. Many of them were abusers of power under the past regime. There is plenty of evidence of their wrongdoings, yet there has been little progress with the investigation.

According to the Police Headquarters, as of August 6, 2025, a total of 1,730 cases have been filed related to the July uprising, including 731 murder cases. But as of September

**A judge cannot be a legal bureaucrat. They have to be highly moral, gutsy, and fearless defenders of the law and the constitution. We want to see judgments that shake the very foundation of fascist and autocratic governments. We want to see pronouncements that strengthen democratic norms and practices and nip in the bud any attempts by legislative majorities to shrink the space of dissent. Our judges must have the moral responsibility to strengthen our faith in the law.**

2, charge sheets have been submitted in only 34 cases, including 13 murder cases. (We are not including cases filed with the ICT.)

So what happens to the rest? Why should they be forced to live under the ignominy of unproven crimes, especially when no investigation has been completed against most of them?

The government is also aware that a business of extortion has evolved centring the filing of false cases and then deleting names upon payment. What is further distressing is that all the relevant ministries, especially home and law, are aware that cases are being filed based on personal hatred, family conflicts, financial disputes, and political rivalries.

If a political party with wind in its sail decides to punish political rivals belonging to a party now discredited, then false cases pile up at lightning speed, and no one in power is ever bothered about it. Harassing and discrediting a possible rival in the coming election is also a factor.

Since there is no punishment for registering false charges—on the contrary, it has become an excuse for making money—the phenomenon of filing dubious cases has acquired momentum, especially when the government's position is that anyone can file cases and "we cannot do anything about it." But had the government acted on the principle that filing false cases is a crime, and punished those who exploited the right to sue, the floodgates of harassment and extortion would not have opened, and law would not have been so shamefully, deliberately, and wilfully abused.

An investigation by *The Daily Star* revealed that till May 3, 2025, at least 266 journalists have been implicated in

falsely implicated in cases related to last year's mass uprising. We welcome this step but urge that a timeline be set to discharge these cases promptly, otherwise nothing much will come out of this good step.

I will be the first to admit that due to politicisation of journalism, many lost objectivity and honesty as they indulged in shameless sycophancy that

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VISUAL: ANWAR SOHEL

various cases connected with the July-August uprising. At least 14 journalists have been arrested. Of those accused, at least 137 have been implicated in 32 cases (between August 21, 2024 and April 20, 2025) filed in Dhaka, Chattogram, Bogura and Rajshahi. According to case documents, they have been charged with murder, attempted murder, rioting, abduction, vandalism, extortion, assault, and unlawful assembly. Cases have also been filed under the Explosive Substances Act. Why terrorism has been left out is a wonder.

Perhaps today, compared to anywhere else in the world, we have the highest number of media professionals accused of murder and attempted murder. With a change in power, how did so many journalists become murderers overnight? As a lifelong journalist, I find it a matter of great shame and humiliation. Yes, most of them have not been arrested, but many of them have lost their jobs, their social standing, along with their reputation.

And what about those in jail? They have consistently been denied bail. Why? Isn't bail a right under the constitution? There is one female journalist, Farzana Rupa, who has been in jail for more than a year, without any charge framed against her. Why is she being denied bail? Given both the Bangalee and Muslim cultures, the role of a woman in the family and especially in raising children is supreme. Shouldn't this be a factor in considering her bail, particularly when no evidence has been found against her yet? There is also a specific provision of law to grant bail to women and people with disabilities. These are violations of the very basic human rights to restore which people ousted the last government.

After nearly a year of humiliation for those falsely charged, on September 9, the government thankfully formed committees at the district and metropolitan levels in an attempt to identify and discharge individuals

not only discredited our profession but also made it easy for oppression, forced disappearance, extrajudicial killing, and suppression of dissent to continue. Except for a few, newspapers and electronic media houses created a shameful record. Many journalists sold their conscience for benefits and privileges and indulged in corruption, thus denigrating the profession. These so-called journalists should be exposed, charged with appropriate crimes, given a fair trial, and sentenced as the law determines. But to accuse them of murder or attempted murder shows how the government itself trivialises the law. This actually creates cover for the real culprits.

There are many other instances of politicians and former parliamentarians who are in custody for nearly a year or even more. Some of them are in their late 70s and early 80s, and are suffering from ailments that may cause fatal outcomes. There is no progress in the investigation of their cases, yet their bail petitions are constantly being rejected.

Denial of bails was one of the distinct horror stories from the past regime. We wrote many times about the arrests of Mirza Fakhru'l Islam Alamgir, Amir Khosru, and many others, and protested the denial of their bails for months and even years. Writer Mushtaq Ahmed was detained along with cartoonist Ahmed Kabir Kishore in May 2020 for satirical Facebook posts and a cartoon criticising the then government for its handling of the Covid pandemic. Mushtaq died in jail in February 2021 due to indescribable torture. He was denied bail six times by different judges, including a High Court judge. Shouldn't these judges bear some responsibility? They all lacked that crucial ethical commitment that is required of a judge. If one had granted him bail—to which the victim had every right—his death would have definitely been averted. They were not judges but carriers of the government's diktat.

So why is the judiciary still denying bails and not showing independence that we, at least now, expect from it? The police have the responsibility to arrest, but how long a person will be in jail is determined by the judge, including whether he or she should be placed on remand which, as we know, is nothing but a permission for torture. In the past, we saw a judiciary eager to serve the executive branch. Why is that trend being repeated now with the same zeal, loyalty, and disregard for the law, which they are in charge of upholding?

Bail denial was like the second nature of our judges before. Unfortunately, we see no sign of that changing. It seems there is no sufficient respect for the fact that no one has the right to deprive a citizen of even one hour of liberty without lawful process. Whenever a judge denies bail, his or her conscience should bear the heavy burden of depriving a citizen of freedom, liberty, and right to normal life.

The judiciary's excuse is, if the offence is non-bailable, how can a judge grant bail to the accused? Well, here comes the question of fairness