

Expedite reforms to restore public trust

PPRC survey shows mounting frustration with the country’s direction

That public perception of the direction in which the country is moving has increasingly turned pessimistic since the July uprising is a telling indication of Bangladesh’s current state. A recent survey by the Power and Participation Research Centre (PPRC) highlights the depth of this crisis of confidence, revealing that nearly 75 percent of households feel that “nothing works without money” in the country. This assessment, which could more easily be associated with the tenure of the autocratic regime ousted in the uprising, reflects growing frustration over unmet expectations not only in governance but also in other aspects of public services.

The PPRC survey, based on responses from 8,067 families and covering a wide range of issues, shows that more than one in 12 households admitted to paying bribes or extortion money between May 2024 and April 2025. These payments were directed to police, political actors, and government offices to access basic services, avoid legal hassles, or simply because they were demanded. Sustained economic pressures compound these governance challenges. Rising commodity prices, for instance, were cited as a key concern by more than two-thirds of households. Among the poorest, 48.3 percent reported falling incomes, and 30 percent faced food insecurity. Meanwhile, two-thirds of families cited medical expenses as their biggest burden, with over half struggling with high treatment and medicine costs. Education, loan repayments, and other financial obligations are further straining household budgets, deepening a sense of economic desperation.

Concerns about law and order remain equally acute among both urban and rural households. Among low-income families, 41 percent cited corruption, 40.1 percent reported law-and-order issues, and 32.9 percent pointed to a lack of justice. In accessing basic services, complex government procedures, unclear service pathways, delays, and inattentive officials were also cited as routine obstacles. The multifaceted survey also highlighted a widening optimism gap: while only 1.6 percent of the poorest households feel very optimistic about the future, 14.4 percent of the richest reported feeling the same. The youth exhibited slightly higher levels of hope, but frustration over corruption, poor governance and political violence remains widespread overall.

These findings demonstrate that efforts by the interim government have largely failed to improve people’s perceptions about the overall direction of the country. While the authorities have taken various initiatives to address concerns highlighted in the survey, including initiating reforms in certain sectors, it is clear that these have so far failed to deliver meaningful results, or to convince citizens. What people need are not piecemeal or symbolic measures, but systemic interventions that hold institutions accountable and ensure that governance, law and order, and economic management start delivering on the promises made. Failure to do so will be a betrayal of the trust placed in the interim government—and in other stakeholders of the uprising—at a time when the nation cannot afford further disillusionment.

Rising dengue threat must be addressed

Focus on raising awareness, strengthening healthcare facilities

We are deeply concerned about the worsening dengue situation with the cases and deaths rising steadily amid an extended monsoon. On September 21, the DGHS recorded the highest single-day dengue death toll, with 12 fatalities—five in Barisal division. At least 181 deaths and 42,509 infections were reported as of 8am September 22 this year. Although experts had earlier warned that the dengue situation would worsen around this time due to changing weather patterns, their calls for adequate preparation, including by adopting proactive measures, were clearly ignored. Instead, the authorities have continued with the same outdated approach to tackle the disease. The consequences are visible.

Reportedly, delayed hospitalisation has mainly led to the majority of deaths this year. DGHS data shows that around 74 percent of the deaths occurred within 48 hours of hospital admission, meaning that patients were already in critical condition when they were hospitalised. According to healthcare professionals, when a dengue patient arrives at hospital in the final stage, even if proper measures are taken, they are usually not effective. This also indicates that there has been a serious lack of awareness among people about when to seek hospital admission.

While in Dhaka we see some form of awareness among people, with the two city corporations taking at least some initiatives to control mosquitoes as part of their dengue response, such efforts are almost absent in other parts of the country, especially rural areas. This lack of awareness has had severe consequences. Dengue has spread extensively beyond Dhaka since last year, and so far this year, 30,854 people have been infected outside the capital, compared to 10,977 people in Dhaka. Among districts outside the capital, Barguna was worst affected, with 13 deaths reported in it so far. A June survey by IEDCR found Aedes mosquito larvae in 31 percent of homes in Barguna municipality, and a staggering 76 percent in the district’s rural areas. Had the authorities acted on these findings, many of those deaths might have been prevented.

Although the number of dengue infections this year has exceeded last year’s total, the overall mortality rate remains relatively lower. However, the rising number of infections and critically ill patients in recent weeks signals a potentially worsening crisis in the coming days. Therefore, to prevent further loss of life, it is essential to raise awareness about early testing and ensure timely hospitalisation. Special attention needs to be given to containing dengue outside Dhaka and equipping district-level hospitals to manage severe cases effectively. Only a coordinated national effort can help prevent further deaths from dengue.

Why women are leaving the workforce



Dr Selim Raihan is professor in the Department of Economics at Dhaka University, and executive director at the South Asian Network on Economic Modeling (SANEM). He can be reached at selim.raihan@gmail.com.

SELIM RAIHAN

For years, Bangladesh’s economic narrative has been one of remarkable ascent, a story punctuated by the steady hum of sewing machines and the quiet revolution of women entering the workforce in unprecedented numbers. The nation’s climb up the economic ladder was, in many ways, built on the shoulders of its women, particularly in the garment industry that became the engine of its growth. Which is why the latest figures from the Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics (BBS) feel so disquieting, like a sudden, unexpected silence in a once-booming factory. In just one year, the country’s labour force shrank by 17 lakh people, and the overwhelming majority of those who left were women. This isn’t just a statistical blip; it’s the first contraction since 2010, and it signals a potential unravelling of hard-won social and economic gains.

To understand what’s happening, we have to look beyond the single, stark number. The data reveals a tale of two realities. Male participation in the labour force held essentially steady, while female participation plummeted from 2.53 crore to 2.37 crore. This means that nearly all the losses are concentrated among women, effectively erasing a significant portion of the gains made over the last decade and a half. From this perspective, the decline feels less like an economic adjustment and more like a quiet exodus. The question, of course, is why. Why are women, who have been so integral to the nation’s progress, now stepping back?

The answers are complex, woven from global economic shifts and our own entrenched local realities, but they are made more urgent by a particularly troubling detail: this decline is happening prematurely. Bangladesh is experiencing this dip in female labour force participation at a relatively low level of per capita income, a deviation from the typical development pathway that is concerning. There’s a known, almost paradoxical, economic phenomenon at play here. As a country

develops, women’s participation in the labour force often follows a U-shaped curve. It is high in a poor, agrarian economy, dips in the middle stages of development as education enrolments rise, and then climbs again once the economy matures and creates the right kind of jobs. In other words, we may be hitting that difficult middle curve, but we are hitting it too early and from a position of greater economic fragility. Put simply, more of our daughters are in school and university—a



VISUAL: ANWAR SOHEL

tremendous success—but our economy isn’t yet creating the types of jobs they expect and deserve once they graduate, leaving a generation of educated women in a precarious limbo between aspiration and reality.

This gap between aspiration and opportunity is critical. For women with little formal education, the traditional gateway into the formal economy—the garment sector—is itself transforming. Automation and advanced technology are reducing the reliance on vast numbers of low-skilled workers. The share of women in this industry has fallen significantly, meaning the very door that powered their entry is now narrowing. These women now require

more skills to remain competitive, and without large-scale, targeted training programmes, many are being left behind.

For the growing number of educated women, the barriers are different but equally formidable. What this implies is a landscape of frustration. The modern service sector jobs in education, healthcare, finance, or hospitality that should naturally absorb them are not being created fast enough. Even when such jobs exist, the absence of supportive infrastructure—reliable public transport, safe workplaces, and most crucially, affordable childcare—pushes them out. The burden of unpaid care work at home remains overwhelmingly on their shoulders, a social factor that no economic policy can afford to ignore. So, a young woman might graduate with a degree but find no job that matches her qualifications, or she

payment or financial autonomy. This kind of precarious, invisible labour does not equate to genuine economic empowerment. The real concern, therefore, is not just the recent decline, but the persistent failure to create high-quality, stable, and formal jobs for women, particularly in urban areas and modern sectors. Ultimately, the pattern of structural transformation in Bangladesh has failed to ensure that women are successfully integrated into the new economic landscape.

The consequences of this reversal are profound and far-reaching. On a macroeconomic level, it represents a massive waste of talent and potential, a drag on national productivity and GDP growth that the country can ill afford as it aims for higher development goals. But the true cost is human. Declining female labour force participation threatens to reverse decades of social progress. Economic independence is a key driver of better health outcomes, educational attainment for children, and greater autonomy for women within their households and communities. When that independence is curtailed, all these other gains become vulnerable.

Addressing this challenge requires a move beyond simplistic solutions. It demands a multipronged strategy that acknowledges the different needs of different women. For the urban educated, it means aggressively creating opportunities in the service sector and building the infrastructure—childcare centres, flexible work arrangements, and safe transport—that allows them to thrive. For those displaced by automation in manufacturing, it means investing in large-scale, targeted skills development and reskilling programmes. And for rural women, it means breaking down the barriers to entrepreneurship—access to capital, markets, and information—so they can build sustainable businesses in the non-farm sector.

The declining curve on the chart is more than a data point—it is a warning. It tells us that the path of progress is not linear or guaranteed. The momentum that lifted so many women into the economy is faltering, and without deliberate, thoughtful intervention, we risk not just stalling but sliding backwards. The strength of Bangladesh’s economy has always been its people. To continue rising, it cannot afford to leave half of them behind.

Our cities need more than master plans to survive



Kabir Uddin is a GIS and remote sensing specialist and Bangladesh country focal point at the International Centre for Integrated Mountain Development (ICIMOD) in Nepal.

KABIR UDDIN

In today’s Bangladesh, from small settlements to largest cities, a stark reality is evident: unplanned urbanisation, insufficient amenities for residents, and environmental degradation are gradually rendering our cities uninhabitable. At the root of the problem lies a failure to properly formulate and implement all three types of plans—strategic plan, master plan, and detailed area plan (DAP)—for unplanned settlements and urban development. Furthermore, urban planning is frequently focused on divisional cities, while attention remains concentrated on the largest centres.

Traffic congestion, inadequate waste management, waterlogging, and air and noise pollution have now become commonplace in our cities. The abnormal population pressure, combined with unplanned infrastructure, has exacerbated the crisis. Narrow roads, long boundary walls along the streets, inadequate sewage systems, and disappearance of green spaces are making urban life increasingly difficult. There are roads in many residential areas across the country where even two rickshaws cannot pass side by side. In numerous places, the trend of building houses obstructing the flow of canals and rivers is growing, posing a serious risk. Meanwhile, the conversion of

agricultural land into residential areas continues unabated.

If unplanned urbanisation persists, the situation will deteriorate further. Climate change will heighten the risk of flooding and other natural disasters. Inadequate housing and the lack of efficient, environment-friendly public transport systems will intensify social

It is often stated that municipalities in Bangladesh have master plans. One cannot help but ask: do the relevant authorities or mayors truly understand the degree of effectiveness of a master plan? It is a long-term strategic document that outlines specific residential, commercial and industrial areas, as well as roads, parks, and open spaces, and includes zone-based guidelines in order to ensure sustainable development.

inequality, stifling the cities’ economic growth. Urban centres will lose vitality and turn into chaotic seas of people.

It is often stated that municipalities in Bangladesh have master plans. One cannot help but ask: do the relevant authorities or mayors truly understand the degree of effectiveness of a master plan? It is a long-term strategic document that outlines specific residential, commercial and industrial areas, as well as roads,

parks, and open spaces, and includes zone-based guidelines in order to ensure sustainable development. The approved plan is published as an ordinance.

However, its main drawback is a lack of specific and detailed information. For example, when someone wants to build a house, there is frequently no clear guidance on how much space should be reserved for a road. This is why a DAP is required to effectively implement a master plan. A DAP enables detailed planning and implementation at a small scale, while taking local conditions into account. Its main advantage is that it can be easily updated if necessary, enabling it to keep pace with rapidly changing urban requirements. Most cities in Bangladesh still lack effective master

considerations. Sustainable urban development is only possible if all three types of plans are implemented together.

To overcome this crisis, specific steps must be taken, including proper planning, strict enforcement of laws and policies, and a zero tolerance approach to unplanned and illegal construction. When an accident occurs in a building, it is often revealed that the establishment was constructed illegally. This disclosure should not come this late. At the same time, municipalities and city corporations require financial and technical support as well as skilled staff to operate more efficiently. It should also be noted that an isolated planned housing project cannot possibly solve all of a city’s problems. It requires a holistic approach.

In addition to planning, it is vital to reduce reliance on private cars and develop an improved and affordable public transport system to meet commuters’ demand as well as ease traffic congestion. Public participation in the urban planning process must also be ensured. If projects are developed based on the needs and opinions of the people, they will prove to be more effective.

The time has come to take decisive action to ensure a liveable and sustainable urban environment. This is not solely the responsibility of the government; creating a well-planned and attractive city requires citizens’ collective awareness and participation as well. However, due to the country’s lack of skilled and experienced town planning and geospatial professionals, planning may not begin in all municipalities simultaneously. Implementation should, therefore, proceed gradually, allowing one city’s experience to benefit others.