

## Violence against girls is wrecking our future

Authorities must ensure that systemic failures are addressed to ensure safety

Bangladesh has made major strides toward human development outcomes over the years, but beneath this narrative of progress lies a corrosive social and judicial failure: the systemic betrayal of girls. New data, detailing a sharp spike in violence against minors and chronic exposure to child marriage, suggests the country's development gains are being undermined by the culture of impunity.

The statistics are unforgiving. Police records for the first eight months of 2025 show 3,589 rape cases filed nationwide, with a staggering 1,172 involving minors. The official figure, however, is often viewed as the floor rather than the ceiling of a true crisis. Civil society groups report a frightening acceleration: the rape of girl children rose by 83 percent in the first nine months of the year, while attempted rapes soared by 163 percent. Alarming, 20 percent of child rape victims in the initial months of 2025 were aged six or younger, confirming that the most vulnerable ones are facing the highest risks.

This physical violence is compounded by a structural violence—that of early marriage. A recent Plan International report shines a stark light on the devastating economic and personal consequences of this detrimental practice worldwide, despite it being illegal. Of the young women married as children, nearly one in three are now divorced, facing stigma and acute financial hardship, the report reveals. When poverty forces a family to marry off a daughter at 14, as one young Bangladeshi woman testified, the immediate financial relief is dwarfed by the long-term cost of lost productivity, deteriorating health, reduced lifetime earnings, and the cycle of dependence. These girls, robbed of educational opportunities, become long-term dependents rather than economic contributors, locking families into the very poverty trap they sought to escape.

The link between social violence and economic exploitation is tragically symbiotic. Fear of sexual harassment and abduction often drives families to seek the perceived "protection" of early marriage, a coping mechanism that ultimately exposes girls to domestic violence and financial dependency. The government's response to both facets of this crisis—preventive and punitive—is clearly inadequate.

The authorities must ensure rapid, transparent, and robust investigation and prosecution of sexual violence cases, dismantling the culture of impunity that shields abusers. It's time to reform the Child Marriage Restraint Act to plug existing legal loopholes. There also need to be social protection schemes in place to help vulnerable families keep their daughters in school.

The annual observance of International Day of the Girl Child on October 11 underscores a persistent policy gap: the failure to protect and leverage female human capital. With this year's theme, "the girl I am, the change I lead," the focus shifts to recognising girls not as passive victims but as frontline agents of change, a position that requires immediate strategic investment. Bangladesh's economic future depends on the full engagement of its populace. Allowing violence and structural exploitation to sideline millions of women is an act of economic self-harm. We, all of us together, must commit to concrete action to protect our girls and secure our future.

## Stop concretising Osmani Udyan

Constructing permanent structures inside any park is unacceptable

It is extremely disappointing to witness the never-ending construction work at Osmani Udyan, located near Gulistan under the Dhaka South City Corporation (DSCC). Known as the "lung of the capital", the park has been off-limits for nearly eight years now. During the Awami League regime, the DSCC undertook various development projects to modernise the park, and the work has dragged on indefinitely due to inefficiency and mismanagement. Now, as city dwellers eagerly await its reopening, the interim government has begun implementing another project—building a memorial monument to commemorate the July uprising. While honouring uprising martyrs is very important, does it make sense to build this monument inside a park, especially one already overburdened with concrete structures?

Reportedly, the local government ministry has undertaken the project at a cost of Tk 46 crore, and construction work has already begun. Urban planners, however, have said that before taking on any such projects within parks, the standard practice around the world is to first present the proposal to the public and finalise the design based on feedback before implementation begins. But in the case of this project and the others before it, we have not heard of any such initiatives taken by the government. While these unaccountable practices were rampant during the AL regime, they cannot be accepted in post-uprising Bangladesh.

Moreover, according to urban planners, architects, and environmentalists, our rules clearly state that concrete structures can occupy up to five percent of a park's area, and no structure taller than 16 feet can be built inside a park. But in Osmani Udyan, construction has already exceeded that limit, and the new monument is supposed to be 90-feet high. More worryingly, the site selected for the construction is the area designated as a children's play zone in the current development plan, according to sources at the local government ministry. All this highlights poor planning and negligence, to say the least.

Due to excessive concretisation, Osmani Udyan has already lost much of its original character, and the prolonged renovation has come at a heavy cost to the city residents. The government, therefore, should stop building additional concrete structures. Regarding the construction of the July memorial monument, it is essential that the decision is made through thorough consultation with all stakeholders. Experts have suggested that a museum preserving the memories of the uprising could be established inside an existing building there, while the monument could be built elsewhere. We hope the government will reconsider its decision and protect the park from further concretisation.

# Girls must grow up in a safe environment to lead our future



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Today, children live in a world where they face increasing repression and violence, both in conflict zones and in otherwise peaceful regions. According to the United Nations, more than 22,000 children globally became victims of grave violations last year, with the highest number, unsurprisingly, reported in the occupied Palestinian territory. Compared to 2023, total violations rose by 25 percent, while rape and other forms of sexual violence increased by 34 percent. Across the world, girls face a greater risk of sexual violence than boys, not only in war zones but also in everyday life.

Even in the United States, one in every four girls is estimated to experience child sexual abuse, according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. Globally, about 15 million adolescent girls aged 15-19 have experienced forced sex in their lifetime. In Bangladesh too, violence against children has long been a worrying concern. Data compiled by Ain o Salish Kendra (ASK) and Bangladesh Mahila Parishad (BMP), as well as a concept note presented at a recent seminar on "Community-based Strategies for Protection of Children of Bangladeshi Garment Workers," paint a grim picture.

According to ASK, during the past nine months of this year (January-September), 359 girls were reported to have been raped—higher than the total number reported for the entire year of 2024. Of these cases, only 300 resulted in formal complaints, meaning at least 59 children were denied justice. The age breakdown of the victims underscores the gravity of the situation: 61 were below six years old, 116 were between seven and 12, and 116 were teenagers. The ages of the remaining victims could not be confirmed.

The BMP's survey, based on reports from 14 national dailies, found that in September alone, 92 girls were subjected to various forms of violence and repression across the country, including 28 who were raped. As for the concept note presented at the seminar, it revealed that nine out of every 10 children aged between 1 and 14 are being subjected to physical punishment or emotional abuse. It also indicated that repression against girls in 2025 increased by 75 percent compared to 2024. Moreover, over 23,000 child-related cases remain pending in juvenile courts across the country.

Although these organisations follow different methodologies, their findings converge on several alarming truths. First, violence against children takes multiple forms, ranging from physical punishment and emotional abuse to rape and sexual harassment. Second, it affects children of all ages, even toddlers. Third, children are not safer even in their homes, schools, or madrasas, as in many cases, the

misogyny and patriarchy, manifested through frequent displays of male dominance and aggression.

Repressed sexuality, stemming from the lack of healthy social interactions between young men and women, can also lead to such violence. BMP data show that 28 percent of rapists are aged between 11 and 30, and 24 percent of gang rapists are between 16 and 25. Easy access to pornography and obscene online content has in recent years further fuelled distorted attitudes towards women. BMP's findings also show that most reported cybercrimes targeting girls involve individuals aged between 16 and 30. Another factor may be the resentment some men feel as girls and women achieve greater success in education and employment. This insecurity, coupled with frustration and failure in life, can manifest as hatred and

the legal framework requires deadlines for investigation and case disposal, legal ambiguities, inconsistent case findings, and age-related thresholds that often obstruct proper actions. This must be fixed. Weak law enforcement and lack of accountability must also be addressed to end the prevailing culture of impunity.

At the social level, family guidance is key. Children should be taught early about personal boundaries, safe and unsafe touches, and how to seek help. Schools and madrasas must also have proper safeguarding systems, and teachers should be trained accordingly. Perpetrators, regardless of their position or relation to the victim, must face strict punishment and permanent bans from working with children. Setting up local child protection committees could help detect and prevent abuse. Protecting



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'Unless we ensure our girls' safety, we cannot expect them to lead the change or build a better world for all.'

perpetrators are either relatives or neighbours or teachers. Fourth, many crimes go unreported due to stigma, family pressure, safety concerns, and so on. Finally, the justice system has failed to address the culture of violence against children, with cases piling up in courts and often remaining unresolved.

These realities raise two critical questions: why is violence against children, especially girls, increasing, and what can be done to stop it? The first question defies easy answers. The fact that even infants are not being spared speaks of a deep moral and psychological rot. Who are these perpetrators, and what's driving them to commit such heinous crimes? Violence against girl children is generally a reflection of extreme

violence.

So, what can be done against this backdrop? Comprehensive measures—legal, social, and psychological—are clearly essential. Legally, delays in investigations and trials must end, and victim and witness protection laws must be properly enacted. Shame and stigma that often lead to non-reporting of sexual assaults, and eventually to justice being denied, must also be challenged through open discussion in families, schools, madrasas, and such social settings. Religious leaders, role models, and media influencers can play a crucial role in raising awareness in this regard.

Once cases are reported, there must be mechanisms in place to prevent political interference or pressure from the accused from derailing trials. While

children from pornography and harmful online content should also be a priority.

Finally, we need expert psychological insights to understand and rehabilitate potential offenders. Ultimately, families, communities, educational institutions, civil society, and the state must act together to eliminate violence against children, especially girls.

The theme for this year's International Day of the Girl Child (observed on Saturday)—"The girl I am, the change I lead: Girls on the frontlines of crisis"—carries a powerful message. But unless we ensure our girls' safety and protect them from violence, we cannot expect them to lead the change or build a better world for us all.

# Why the Gaza 'peace treaty' is a victory for violence, not peace



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As smoke rises from the ruins of Gaza, world leaders are hailing a new "peace deal." But this treaty is another sleight of hand. Weapon of choice: language. Victims: the voiceless and those on the wrong side of power.

Words may not kill, but they shape how we perceive killing by controlling meaning and dulling empathy. They mute the moral register, turning human catastrophe into something sterile: "international affairs."

To label the carnage in Gaza a "war" rather than a "massacre" is not semantics; it is strategy. The term "war" somewhat normalises the violence. The word "massacre," by contrast, is a moral accusation that demands outrage and intervention.

By any objective criteria, this is no war. With Palestinian fatalities outnumbering Israeli ones by more than twenty to one, the grim ratio speaks for itself. Yet the official discourse resists the language of slaughter, preferring the sanitised symmetry of "war." This is how language is subjugated: dictate the terms, and you dictate the response.

Modern conflict comes wrapped in sterilised discourse that allows us to discuss horror without ever naming it. Innocent civilians killed by bombs and bullets become "collateral damage." A phrase like "surgical strike" implies precision, even when entire apartment blocks are levelled. Executing people on sight is described as "neutralising threats," while "human shields" shifts blame for civilian deaths onto the very population being bombed.

This jargon, repeated endlessly by anti-Palestine officials and echoed by Western media, creates emotional disconnect. A headline about "another day of war in Gaza" sounds tragic but routine. Imagine, instead, "another day of massacre in Gaza."

The official narrative—a "war on Hamas" fought through "security measures"—collapses when confronted with the reality on the ground. Officials speak of "precision strikes," yet the UN reports that 94 percent of Gaza's hospitals and over 90 percent of its schools have been damaged or destroyed. They speak of "necessary security measures,"

yet the world witnessed a "complete siege" that choked off food, water, and medicine, inducing famine for over half a million people.

The toll is staggering. Over 67,000 Palestinians—roughly 3 percent of Gaza's population—have been killed, the vast majority civilians. More than 1,700 health workers have been killed in what UN experts call the "targeted destruction of Gaza's health care system." This systematic demolition of civilian infrastructure, far exceeding any conceivable hunt for militants, reveals not a campaign hindered by "human shields," but a level of force that is fundamentally indiscriminate. The juxtaposition of the sanitised narrative and the physical ruins should be unbearable.

Now, the diplomatic narrative shifts to a "peace plan," presented as a vision of "a strong, durable, and everlasting peace." But the proposals championed by global powers reveal how the language of peace is used to codify control.

These plans consistently require one side to fully surrender in exchange for a halt to the offensive. Importantly, they exclude any mention of Palestinian political aspirations. There is no provision for ending the occupation, no commitment to self-determination, and, as multiple analyses confirm, "no path for eventual reunification" with the West Bank in a future Palestinian state. Instead, they envisage Gaza's two million residents being governed

like a protectorate under an interim authority intriguingly named the "Board of Peace."

Labelling such arrangements a "Peace Treaty" is the final act of linguistic subjugation. It allows the world to move on while the root causes—the blockade, the occupation, the denial of statehood—remain untouched. This is not peace; it is the pause between wars. And the twentieth century's partitions and protectorates that redrew the Middle East, not to mention South Asia, have shown that such patchworks never hold.

A peace treaty built on these terms is not just inaccurate—it is insidious. It gives the world order permission to sweep the Palestinian tragedy under the rug.

True peace cannot grow from distortion. Palestinians need the siege lifted, freedom of movement restored, and their right to self-determination recognised. A just resolution requires a mandate for de-occupation and genuine reconstruction, alongside guarantees for the safety of all civilians—Israeli and Palestinian alike.

And as Bangladeshis—a people whose own liberation finds itself on the frontlines of a battle of discourse—we know the price of silence too well. Our moral duty, then, is not only to speak, but to speak truthfully. We must call a massacre a massacre. We must call an occupation an occupation. Because peace built on lies is not peace at all—it is forever war.