

The unfinished revolution for women's political rights



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For more than five decades, women's representation in Bangladesh's national parliament, the place where political and state policies are shaped, has remained very low, despite the introduction of reserved seats for female candidates. Nonetheless, research shows that reserved seats do not translate into real political power for women. Thus, post July 2024, it became an important agenda for the discourse on female political participation.

Women's participation in the uprising was not merely symbolic; they stood at the forefront as leaders with agency and courage. Women's visibility is often strategically employed during political rallies—either to discourage law enforcement from using repressive tactics, or, if they are attacked, to generate public sympathy that can strengthen the movement. But in the July uprising, even if female students' participation in the earlier phase was strategic, once the killings started, women took charge with genuine leadership and decision-making power. Women from all walks of life—mothers, homemakers, doctors, teachers, journalists, regardless of their profession—took bold steps to protect students and other protesters, organised rallies, and provided shelter and other strategic support necessary to sustain the movement on the ground.

As a result, it was expected that women would have a visible and central role in policymaking in the post-July discussions on political reform. However, we saw only a few women in the interim government cabinet. Besides, none of the three student advisers appointed to the cabinet were women. This immediately raised concerns that women were being sidelined. If you look at the photographs or screen grabs from August 5, 2024, the presence of women among anti-discrimination student leaders is hardly visible.

Later, we saw deliberate efforts from certain groups to restrict women's physical movement as well as rampant harassment of women in cyberspace. There were even some seminars and discussions on women's issues held in the capital, where all the speakers were men. This created a perception that women were being deliberately excluded.

There are both social and political reasons behind this exclusion. Politics in Bangladesh has never been a safe or welcoming space for women. It relies heavily on money and muscle power—areas where women are often perceived as disadvantaged. This perception has some basis: women still lack equal rights to property and wealth. Even the rights that religion grants to women are not fully realised in Bangladesh. Even working women often do not have full authority over their earnings. Major family decisions in a household, such as marriage, education, or medical spending, are still taken by men.

With little to no property ownership and limited control over their earnings, it becomes extremely difficult for women to participate in the money-driven world of electoral politics. Besides, politics is often conflict-ridden, and women are less visible in those confrontational spaces.

Patriarchal values, both in society and among women themselves, reinforce this exclusion. Families, the state, and even colleagues often create social and institutional barriers that prevent women from fully participating in political discussions. This has been blatantly displayed by the lack of females in the meetings of the all-male consensus commission, where political parties did not bring their female colleagues during the most important discussions about our politics.

Moreover, because most women receive little support from men in sharing household responsibilities, they bear a double burden—

managing both domestic and professional duties—which becomes a triple burden when they also engage in activism. Since politics demands full time commitment, many women hesitate to join this profession, not because of a lack of ability, but because the system makes it unsustainable for them.

Despite these structural barriers, we had hoped that the uprising would create an opportunity to strengthen women's political

for increasing women's representation in parliament following both the Constitution Reform Commission and the Electoral Reform Commission's proposals. We expected that, after decades of reserved seats that failed to ensure genuine empowerment, the focus would now shift towards direct elections.

We, the Forum for Women's Political Rights, proposed that if our society is not yet ready for full direct elections, the reserved

remained, without any promise of direct elections.

Another major concern for women in politics is the cost of elections. Given the role of money in politics, we have demanded reforms to ensure fairness. Specifically, we proposed that the government finance the campaign expenses of all female candidates as part of the gender budgeting framework, which the government already promotes internationally. The state should provide campaign funds to all female candidates who will later submit expenditure reports within three months, regardless of election results.

The fate of these proposals remains uncertain, as recent events offer little confidence that women's voices are being included in political decision-making. For example, many of the 32 political parties involved in the July Charter discussions had little or no real public support, yet they were invited to the table, while women, who make up half the population, were not. The government never formally met with women's groups or leaders to discuss the charter clauses, despite Bangladesh's long and respected history of women's movements. The complete exclusion of women from these processes is not just a failure; it is an embarrassment for the government and for the so-called "human rights champions" and NGO leaders who are part of it.

This is an opportunity lost due to the inaction and indifference of the government and our party leaders. The consensus-building process could have been a chance to include women, gender-diverse communities, and other marginalised groups in shaping a more inclusive, equitable Bangladesh. Unfortunately, they were left out. The system that women trusted has drawn a charter that hardly reflects the aspirations of women and these groups. Therefore, the Forum for Women's Political Rights has formally rejected the July Charter.

The forum met the Election Commission, political leaders, and civil society organisations through roundtables, conferences, and press briefings to demand that women be included in the political process in a meaningful way. We know we have not yet succeeded. But our fight for women's political rights will continue. This is a long race, and we are preparing for it. We will keep working, with even greater determination, in the days to come.



FILE PHOTO: TITU DAS
In the July uprising, even if female students' participation in the earlier phase was strategic, they eventually took charge with genuine leadership and decision-making power.

voice through greater representation in new political platforms and the interim government. Yet, the government delayed forming the Women's Affairs Reform Commission. When it was finally formed and the commission submitted its report, the members faced harassment and intimidation. Worse still, the government failed to stand by the commission members and did not include the report's suggestions in the consensus talks. This left many women feeling betrayed, with neither the government nor the political parties taking their concerns seriously.

Still, women continued to trust the reform process and saw it as a significant opportunity

seats provision can continue temporarily, but the seats should be filled through direct voting. We also demanded that political parties increase the percentage of female candidates they nominate for general seats. The Representation of the People Order (RPO), 1972, required every political party to ensure 33 percent female representation in its committees by 2020, but parties repeatedly failed the deadline that was later extended to 2030 through an amendment in 2023. When we spoke with the parties, we were disappointed to see their reluctance to our most basic demands, such as 33 percent nominations for women. Reserved seats

A bitter brew: Climate change and the decline of Sylhet's tea gardens



MIND THE GAP

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There's a certain poetic irony in the fact that while we sip our morning cha and post inspirational quotes about climate change on social media, the tea leaves themselves are quietly dying. Sylhet, once described as a place where the hills smelled faintly of tannins and nostalgia, now smells more like apprehension. Climate change is not knocking at our door politely anymore. It is behind the kitchen counter, stirring the pot and casually spilling hot tea all over our economy.

Bangladesh ranks as the ninth-largest tea producer in the world. Sylhet and its surrounding districts, Moulvibazar and Habiganj, account for the vast majority of production. These emerald slopes, immortalised in colonial postcards and honeymoon photos, yield around 9.7 crore

kilograms of tea a year. But the romance ends there. The Bangladesh Tea Research Institute (BTRI) reports that yields at the historic Malnicherra Tea Estate, the oldest one in Bangladesh, have been declining by about 110 kg per hectare every year between 2012 and 2017. This conveys the message that our tea gardens are slowly bleeding out.

The weather in Sylhet has developed the emotional stability of a reality TV contestant. In the first three months of 2024, the region recorded significantly lower rainfall compared to the amount during the same period the previous year. By April 2024, Sylhet recorded 39.2 degrees Celsius, the highest temperature in history between 2006 and 2025. The tea bushes, delicate as they are, now face an existential dilemma: drown or dehydrate.

Tea plants are fussy by nature. They thrive on balance. But instead of moderate rainfall and gentle sunshine, they now endure flash floods followed by droughts—sometimes in the same week. Pest infestations have also become more aggressive, as warmer, wetter conditions turn Sylhet into an all-you-can-eat buffet for fungi and insects. To survive, farmers have resorted to chemical pesticides that degrade soil and pollute water. This resulted in lower yields, weaker plants, and suffocating humidity in which the workers spend their days plucking leaves while coughing through pesticide fumes.

And if you thought the suffering ends with the plants, think again. The real cost of your cup of cha is paid by the workers who pluck its leaves. There are over three lakh tea workers in Bangladesh, and nearly three-quarters of them are women. Many belong to marginalised ethnic communities and live in tin-roofed quarters that leak during every monsoon. When yields drop, their incomes fall too, because pay depends on how many leaves they can pick. For them, climate change is not an abstract debate—it is dinner.

Meanwhile, in air-conditioned conference rooms in Dhaka, someone would soon host yet another "stakeholder dialogue" on climate-smart agriculture. There will be

slides, buzzwords and polite nodding. Then everyone will go home and drink imported coffee. Because why invest in irrigation systems, shade trees, and better wages when you can have a lovely panel discussion instead?

The BTRI has made some progress in developing drought-tolerant cultivars, but the work remains painfully small in scale. What Sylhet's tea gardens need is not another pilot project—they need real policy muscle. Irrigation canals, soil conservation, agroforestry, fair-trade wages, and credit support for smallholders are no longer optional. Without them, the industry will continue to crumble under a heatwave of neglect.

Globally, tea prices have been falling even as production costs rise. The result is a cruel paradox: farmers work harder for less, while consumers demand cheaper blends. We chase discounts like Olympic medals, never stopping to think who is actually paying for them. That "Buy One Get One" box of teabags is not a bargain—it is a warning. Discounted tea today is tomorrow's scarcity, neatly packaged with a smile.

Projections by the United Nations Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) indicate that tea cultivation areas could shrink by 2050, and climate models forecast a 40

percent decline in tea yields in Northeast India and adjacent regions. Tea is not merely an export item; it is woven into the country's cultural fabric. It is what we start our mornings with, soothe our tempers with, and survive our politics with. Losing it would be like losing a national ritual—the one thing that unites us, regardless of how divided we are about everything else.

And yet, we remain blissfully oblivious. As long as the kettle boils, the problem does not seem to exist to us. But here is the inconvenient truth: the storm has already arrived in your cup. Every sip you take now carries the flavour of a changing climate, the bitterness of exploitation, and the faint aroma of apathy.

Perhaps the next time we sit down with a steaming cup of cha, we should pause for a moment of inconvenient gratitude. Because that comforting sip comes from a plant that is burning, a worker who is sweating, and a planet that is begging for a break. Climate change is not just altering the weather—it is rewriting the taste of tradition.

So, drink your tea slowly, savour it deeply, and remember: Sylhet's hills are not eternal. They are whispering, warning, and wilting—one leaf at a time. And if we do not start listening soon, the only thing left to steep will be regret.



YESTERDAY'S ANSWERS



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ACROSS
1 Intense beam
6 Unmovable
11 Sung story
12 Plain silly
13 J.R. Ewing, for one
14 Evil spirit
15 Movie pooch
17 Budget item
18 Muscle quality
20 Movie pooch
22 Outdated
23 Passes along, as a present
26 Cover words
28 Shop turner
29 Augment
31 Derby, e.g.
32 Amorous archer
33 Fine study
34 Amazon rodent

36 A fan of
38 Japanese cartoon genre
40 "Lou Grant" star
43 Loosen, as laces
44 "Superman" star
45 Tier
46 TV oldie "Ben —"

DOWN
1 Whole bunch
2 Clumsy one
3 Emmy-winning HBO series
4 Wipe away
5 Crazy talk
6 Relieve (of)
7 Resistance to change
8 Emmy-winning HBO series
9 A party to
10 Car scar
16 Consumed
18 Pledge week premium
19 Ken of "thirtysomething"
21 Lusty look
23 Nevada city
24 Not this
25 Filming sites
27 1960s TV western
30 CBS series with spinoffs
33 Puzzled
34 Giamatti of "Billions"
35 "True Blood" star Paquin
37 Dealer's foe
39 Poetic "always"
41 Genesis woman
42 Spanish king