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FOUNDER EDITOR: **LATE S. M. ALI**

New family planning strategy a right move

Political will is a must to implement the plan's rights-based approach

The launch of a national family planning strategy is a welcome pivot. With this, the government is signalling a move away from the blunt instrument of population control to population management, a more nuanced, rights-based approach. This shift is a strategic necessity for a nation poised to graduate from its Least Developed Country status in 2026.

Bangladesh's achievements in family planning and maternal health are undeniable, with maternal mortality dropping from 574 deaths per 100,000 live births in 1990 to 236 in 2023. However, past success seems to have bred complacency, and the stagnation of the contraceptive prevalence rate at 64 percent for nearly a decade is a stark warning. The new strategy correctly identifies the challenges: a persistently high unmet need for contraception, alarming rates of adolescent marriage, and worrying regional disparities, particularly in Chattogram and Sylhet.

This new framework aims to align family planning with human rights and the Sustainable Development Goals, moving beyond simply hitting numerical targets for contraceptive use. It requires a fundamental reorientation of the healthcare system to ensure that "every pregnancy is by choice, not by chance," as the UNFPA representative, Catherine Breen Kamkong, aptly put it. Under this approach, individuals—especially women and adolescents—must be empowered with information and investment in youth is crucial. However, the fact that half of all girls marry before 18 cannot be ignored. This is a drain on the nation's human capital, not just a social malaise. An educated, healthy, and economically active female population is a proven catalyst for growth. Therefore, the strategy's focus on adolescents should be its main agenda.

The government's emphasis on data-driven systems and comprehensive primary healthcare, as highlighted by its senior officials, is the correct path. Strengthening healthcare management at the primary level is the bedrock upon which universal health coverage is built. Furthermore, motivating and equipping field workers, improving birth registration, and fostering national research ownership are essential pillars that will determine whether this strategy succeeds. At the same time, relevant authorities must act quickly to resolve the contraceptive shortage that health centres have been facing for several months. Govt must increase access to free and affordable contraceptives for poor and remote communities, and address the high discontinuation rates of contraceptives and the reliance on short-acting methods through a more sophisticated, client-centred approach. Reaching marginalised communities in urban slums and lagging regions demands targeted interventions.

The National Family Planning Strategy 2025-2030 provides a coherent and thoughtful blueprint. Its success, however, will be measured not by its launch but by its implementation. It will require sustained political will, adequate funding, and a relentless focus on accountability. If Bangladesh can translate this strategy from paper into practice, it will not only safeguard the health of its women and girls but also secure a more equitable future for the entire nation.

A legal void that fails the metro victims

The absence of clear compensation rules unacceptable

The death of a pedestrian and injuries to two others in Dhaka's Farmgate area on Sunday from the collapse of bearing pad from a metro rail pillar, have exposed more than a safety failure. They have revealed a deeper flaw in our legal framework: the absence of an enforceable system for compensating victims of metro rail-related accidents. Under the Metro Rail Act, 2015, the Dhaka Mass Transit Company Limited (DMTCL) is legally bound to compensate anyone injured or killed during its operations. The act also mandates insurance coverage for passengers and third parties, including pedestrians. However, the corresponding Metro Rail Rules, 2016, fail to specify how such compensation should be determined or who must pay it, leaving victims and their families without any legal avenue for redress.

At present, compensation is only granted if the government chooses to do so or if it is ordered by a court. When the road transport and bridges adviser announced Tk 5 lakh in compensation and a job for one family member of the victim Abul Kalam Azad, he admitted that due to the absence of relevant provisions in the metro rail regulations, he announced the compensation in accordance with the Road Transport Act, 2018. This should not have been the case. Moreover, when DMTCL officials admit that they have not implemented the mandatory insurance provisions due to "enormous financial cost," they are, in essence, saying that financial convenience outweighs legal and moral responsibility. But should public safety and accountability be conditional on financial convenience?

When it comes to compensating victims of preventable deaths, such as road crashes, fires, or falls into open drains, we see a serious systemic failure across sectors. While the Road Transport Act, 2018, at least specifies compensation amounts, the process is lengthy and complex, and often denies the sufferers timely redress. For metro rail victims, the situation is even worse. The Metro Rail Rules, 2016, contain no provision for compensating accident victims. This legal void exposes the state's negligence and lack of accountability. The government must therefore urgently amend the Metro Rail Act, 2015 and its rules to define clear procedures and responsibilities for compensating the victims, implement the mandatory insurance under Section 28, and ensure DMTCL provides prompt medical support and compensation, as required by law. Pending amendments must also be finalised and enforced, replacing ad hoc payments with a transparent, rights-based mechanism for all victims.

THIS DAY IN HISTORY

Ottoman Empire signs treaty with Allies

On this day in 1918, representatives of Great Britain and the Ottoman Empire signed an armistice treaty marking the end of Ottoman participation in the World War I, aboard the British battleship Agamemnon, anchored in the port of Mudros on the Aegean island of Lemnos.

Why the proposed NHRC amendment risks ineffectiveness

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MD ABDUL HALIM

VISUAL: **ANWAR SOHEL**

The interim government has recently circulated a proposed amendment to the National Human Rights Commission (NHRC) Act, 2009, to expand the commission's powers to investigate. At the international level, such commissions function as national human rights institutions (NHRIs) under the auspices of the Global Alliance of National Human Rights Institutions (GANHRI), which uses the Paris Principles as its benchmark for NHRI compliance. According to the most recent data, GANHRI member NHRIs are divided into "A" status (fully compliant) and "B" status (partially compliant) institutions. Bangladesh NHRC has undergone GANHRI accreditation twice—in 2011 and 2015—and on both occasions was denied "A" status, being classified instead as "B" status.

In contrast, neighbouring NHRIs in Nepal, India, Thailand, and Malaysia achieved "A" status. Against this background, the proposed amendment seeks not only to enhance the investigative powers of the commission but also to broaden the scope of its jurisdiction. However, there are questions about whether these reforms might meaningfully address the commission's long-standing institutional deficiencies, including its conceptual and procedural gaps.

Section 15 of the proposed amendment stipulates that once prima facie evidence of human rights violations (HRVs) is established, the commission is permitted to initiate an investigation. It further provides that, following such an initial inquiry, a separate investigation may be undertaken within thirty days. The pertinent question, therefore, arises: why should the commission proceed to a further investigation when it has already established HRVs on a prima facie basis? Must the NHRC prove HRVs to the standard of "beyond reasonable doubt", a threshold typically reserved for courts?

The previous decade of the NHRC's experience demonstrates that it failed to exercise its investigative powers even in cases where the 2009 Act explicitly granted such powers. The commission has, instead, consistently investigated crime-related offences, matters outside its statutory mandate. This pattern further substantiates the view that the NHRC has not articulated which rights qualify as human rights, nor has it developed a proper framework for investigating HRVs; its recurring focus on criminal offences rather than HRVs reflects this failure. Further, the NHRC's experience over the past decade reveals an enduring lack of clarity in respect of its institutional role and the evidential standards it should employ when investigating HRVs committed by law-enforcement agencies (LEAs) or public bodies. As an NHRI under the Paris Principles, the NHRC is not required to perform as a court. Indeed, a quasi-judicial body such as the NHRC shouldn't exercise full judicial powers. Consequently, it is evident that the proposed amendment, if enacted, may prove ineffective. Instead of enhancing the NHRC's ability to fulfil its statutory mandate, it risks furnishing the commission with further grounds to evade its responsibilities, rather than providing any remedial measures.

Section 15(9) stipulates that, following an investigation, if the NHRC is of the view that HRVs have been established, it shall conduct a hearing before the parties. Section 15(1) further provides that, after such a hearing, the NHRC must determine whether the alleged HRVs have been substantiated; if so, the commission shall treat the matter as a compoundable offence and refer it to the appropriate court. These provisions reveal a profound lack of both conceptual and procedural understanding of "human rights" and HRVs on the part of the NHRC. This deficiency primarily stems from the fact that the commission bears no responsibility for establishing or refuting criminal liability according to the standard of proof.

Under the original NHRC Act, 2009, particularly Sections 18 and 19, the NHRC's role in cases involving HRVs committed by LEAs is to request a "report" from the government, which it is legally bound to comply with. Upon receipt, the commission must review and analyse the report. This report-seeking mechanism is an independent and distinctive process, similar to that effectively employed by the Indian NHRC since 1994 under Section 19 of the Protection of Human Rights Act, 1993. However, the NHRC of Bangladesh has yet to operationalise this process of identifying non-crime HRVs and address these quasi-judicially.

If the proposed amendment is enacted, the NHRC will forfeit its original power of review and risk becoming an entirely ineffective watchdog for human rights protection. Moreover, the amendment appear does not fully align with the Paris Principles and the procedural nuances involved in establishing non-criminal HRVs against the state, LEAs, and other public authorities.

Unlike the existing statute, the proposed ordinance stipulates that compensation for HRVs, if any, would be recovered as public demands under the Public Demands Recovery Act, 1913 (Bengal Act). Ordinary citizens, including practising lawyers, are well aware of how difficult and cumbersome the process of recovering public demands can be. The current statute, the NHRC Act 2009, modelled after similar NHRI laws in neighbouring countries, provides for the direct payment of compensation to victims of HRVs and empowers the commission to direct the government and other bodies on the mode and process of such payments. However, if the proposed amendment is enacted, probably, victims will never receive the due compensation. It is worth noting that the Indian NHRC, in the last 30 years, has recommended compensations of around INR 150,00,00,000 (around $17 million) in 9,220 HRV cases, and has ensured payment of more than half of the amount. Most fundamentally, the Indian NHRC realises compensation for HRVs not through the PDR Act, but rather through the public law process as developed by the Supreme Court of India.

Under the Paris Principles, NHRIs are not mandated to adjudicate crime-HRVs. However, given the marked conceptual and procedural gaps among stakeholders of the NHRC regarding its jurisdiction and standards of evidence, the proposed amendment should not be enacted in its current form. Rather, the chairman and members should undergo dedicated capacity-building exercises with UN bodies and regional networks to strengthen their institutions internally, including the implementation of rule-making power under Section 30 of the Act. Alternatively, they can engage in comparative learning by examining the Indian NHRC's experience, whose three decades of "A" status under the Paris Principles exemplify sustained adherence to international standards.

Public exam results must not seal an individual's fate

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Every year, when the results of major public exams like the SSC or HSC are published, emotions run high. They spark discussions about the issues in our education system, especially the cracks in it. Similarly, this year, after a large number of students failed or performed poorly in the SSC and HSC exams, detailed analyses from different perspectives tried to unpack the reasons behind the results. However, one point was missing in these discussions, as usual: the idea of blooming late and the need to create an environment supportive of late bloomers.

After the publication of results, society celebrates and rewards those who achieve GPA-5, while others are often made to feel unworthy of attention. Parents become disheartened by the low grades and often some students die by suicide because of failing or receiving low grades. Our society stigmatises such early academic setbacks.

However, no one can guarantee that those who barely passed or even failed these exams will not be late bloomers. Research shows that human development is not linear; some individuals bloom later than others. Everyone is unique in how they learn and grow. Our ways of thinking are diverse, and our learning processes and strategies differ. Moreover, our development is certainly affected by the people and the support they give us, and the environment we live in.

A late bloomer is someone who realises their true potential later in life, often possessing abilities or talents that remain unnoticed by others for a long time. Late bloomers typically do not feel comfortable with the rigid, test-based approach to education.

Real-life anecdotes also suggest that late blooming is not fictitious. Some people take time to find their talents, interests, passions, and voices. Yet, this very idea often remains absent from our public discourse. Our society often has little space for people who bloom late.

For instance, some companies set strict eligibility criteria for job applications, where one cannot even apply if they do not meet specific GPA thresholds in the SSC and HSC exams. Universities in Bangladesh also follow a similar pattern in faculty recruitment. Regardless of later academic excellence or professional growth, candidates with lower grades in school and college cannot even apply. This applies to many other public jobs as well. It means that our society does not want to recognise talents that flourish later, and applicants are often judged based on who they were, not who they are.

I know many individuals who achieved outstanding academic results—like GPA-5 in their secondary and higher secondary exams—and were praised by society for their success in school or college. Yet, they ended up in careers they neither enjoy nor are recognised for. On the other hand, some didn't excel in early public exams but later thrived in higher studies and professional life, standing out through their creativity and talents.

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Throughout my school and college years, I was a mediocre or below-average student—a backbencher, as they say. The challenges of being in that position are constant and exhausting. Many who fall into this category have, at some point, considered dropping out due to feelings of isolation and fear of rejection. Very few of us are fortunate like Ishaan, the character from the Bollywood film *Taare Zameen Par*. The child, struggling with academic failure and parental pressure, blossomed when he received personalised care and attention at his school. Sadly, in our education system, the spotlight is often on those who need it the least, while those who truly require support are left in the shadows. Although many societies welcome diversity, we only celebrate GPA-5 achievers and BCS cadres. We judge endlessly and destroy people's will.

But that should not be allowed to stop late bloomers from thriving. If you are a low achiever in your SSC or HSC exams, or if you have even failed, do not give up. The journey is not easy for a late bloomer in this society. This may not be a welcoming environment for you. Your talents may go unrecognised and unsupported, and you may not receive a nurturing environment. But dismiss toxic public opinions and move forward.

To the parents, learn to recognise and acknowledge that your child may be a late bloomer. They are still struggling to find their way in school or college. Do not judge them, and do not let them feel disheartened.

And finally, it's time we reassessed the relevance of SSC and HSC results in job application criteria. What truly matters is not what someone failed to achieve years ago, but what they are capable of contributing today. Judging someone by their past undermines the infinite possibilities of human potential that exist every moment. Human capability is not static; it evolves. Our society and systems should accept and evolve with it.

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