WHY BANGLADESH still believes teachers should be poor

In Singapore, a secondary school teacher earns the equivalent of Tk 650,000 per month. True, Singapore is one of the most expensive countries in Asia, but even after adjusting for living costs, the income guarantees dignity and financial security. In China, a teacher earns around Tk 220,000—fourteen times higher than in Bangladesh—even though China's cost of living is roughly twice ours.

KAMRUL HASSAN MAMUN

In Bangladesh, we live with a peculiar complacency when it comes to teachers' pay. Many of us casually argue, "Since our teachers are not good enough, their pay is fair." Others add, "They already earn from private tutoring and coaching, so why should we pay them more?" These statements, so casually uttered in drawing rooms and Facebook threads, are far from harmless. They reveal a deep national malaise—our failure to distinguish between the causes and the symptoms of a broken education system.

A recent comparison of secondary school teachers' minimum salaries across seven leading Asian countries exposes the scale of that neglect. In Singapore, a secondary school teacher earns the equivalent of Tk 650,000 per month. True, Singapore is one of the most expensive countries in Asia, but even after adjusting for living costs, the income guarantees dignity and financial security. In China, a teacher earns around Tk 220,000—fourteen times higher than in Bangladesh—even though China's cost of living is roughly twice ours.

Teachers demonstrate in front of the National Press Club in Dhaka on October 12, 2025, demanding an increase in house rent allowance.

PHOTO: ANISUR RAHMAN

PHOTO: PRABIR DAS

It is not difficult to see why China advanced so rapidly. The Chinese understood early that a nation's progress is bound by the quality of its teachers. They invested accordingly. Teacher recruitment there is competitive, well-paid, and deeply respected. The result is not merely better schools, but a stronger, more disciplined, and intellectually confident society.

Bangladesh, by contrast, stands at the bottom of South Asia—not just in teachers' salaries, but also in the overall quality of education. This is not a mere coincidence; it is causality. Our neglect of teachers has corroded not only classrooms but the very fabric of civic life. Look around: the indifference, impatience, and lack of civic responsibility visible in our streets and marketplaces are the social echoes of decades of intellectual neglect.

In Bangladesh, schoolteachers are officially classified as third-class employees. The very phrase is an insult to human dignity. To regard any group of citizens as "third class" is to institutionalise humiliation. To pay them a pittance on top of that only deepens the insult. Behind this arrangement lies a deeply unhealthy psyche. Our politicians want teachers to remain submissive—dependent on them for every favour. They want to be able to summon teachers at will, confident that they will obey.

The creation of politically influenced school management committees has made this control more systematic. Two decades ago, it was the headmaster who ran the school. Today, the president of the managing committee—often a politically connected figure—holds real authority. Through these committees, local politicians and bureaucrats have effectively captured the governance of schools. Teachers, deprived of status and voice, have become functionaries serving the whims of others rather than the needs of students.

I once came across a job advertisement from a well-known school in Dhaka offering a salary so low it bordered on insult. When I later asked a member of the school's management about it, he explained, without irony, "Even with this pay, we get plenty of good applicants. They earn enough from coaching anyway." That single remark captures our national mindset perfectly: we have normalised systemic underpayment, accepted exploitation as efficiency, and conveniently outsourced teachers' dignity to the private coaching market.

This distortion has profound consequences. When a teacher learns to survive at the cost of self-respect, the student learns that survival—not integrity—is the key to success. When the education system rewards side hustles over sincerity, the values of an entire generation are quietly rewritten.

Over time, deprivation normalises itself. Teachers' demands today are so modest that they almost reflect their learned helplessness. Recently, they requested a 20 percent increase in house rent allowance. The government responded with 5 percent, then revised it to 7.5 percent. The message could not be clearer: those who shape the next generation are valued less than the bureaucrats who merely administer the system.

Predictably, many still ask, "Would higher salaries really solve the problem?" The answer is an unequivocal yes—provided that the policy is part of a broader structural reform. A well-paid profession is an attractive profession. Once teaching becomes dignified and rewarding, talented young people will choose it as a career. Recruitment standards will rise, accountability will follow, and over time, both classroom quality and public trust will improve.

Right now, teaching is so poorly compensated that bright graduates shun it altogether. Those who do enter the profession often do so out of necessity, sustained by income from private coaching. This arrangement commodifies education and undermines its moral foundation.

And yet, as a society, we spend millions on private tutoring and overseas education for our children—while fiercely opposing any proposal to raise teachers' pay. Beneath that contradiction lies a dangerous cultural myth: that a "true" teacher must be self-sacrificing, poor, and humble, as though comfort and dignity somehow dilute their virtue.

History proves the opposite. No nation has risen without first dignifying its teachers. Teachers' honour and remuneration are not administrative matters—they are matters of national survival. If we truly care about education, we must repair the cause, not the effect. No amount of training workshops, flashy "education projects", or donor-funded reforms will make a difference as long as teachers live without dignity or security. Governments may continue launching bureaucratic initiatives, but these will remain cosmetic if the core issue—teacher compensation—is ignored.

UNESCO recommends that each country allocate at least 5.5 percent of its GDP to education, with a separate and protected allocation for research and development (R&D). This is because education and R&D are inseparable. A nation that invests in research invests in the creative and intellectual capacity of its people. Without that foundation, even the most modern infrastructure or digital classroom remains hollow.

Yet Bangladesh continues to underinvest in both, spending far less than the regional average on education. Instead of nurturing minds, we pour funds into administrative overheads, projects, and brick-and-mortar expansions that add little value to learning outcomes. The result is predictable: a disillusioned teaching force, a coaching-dependent education system, and a generation that learns to chase grades rather than knowledge.

Raising teachers' salaries is not an act of generosity—it is an act of national investment. Singapore and China did not transform their education systems by chance; they did so by placing teachers at the heart of national policy. We, on the other hand, continue to justify low pay with hollow logic, effectively selling our children's future at a discount.

Until Bangladesh recognises that education begins with the teacher—not the classroom, not the curriculum, and certainly not the project file—our dream of progress will remain just that: a dream.

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RMG's automation and green growth have a gender problem — Don't ignore it

SYEDA ZEENAT KARIM

Fatema (pseudonym), a 27-year-old line operator in a garment factory outside Dhaka, has spent nearly a decade behind a sewing machine. Her hands move with mechanical precision, her daily output closely tracked by production targets. But last year, her factory introduced semi-automated sewing lines. Productivity improved. Jobs did not. Several of Fatema's colleagues—mostly women—were quietly laid off. "I didn't understand the new machine," she said. "No one asked if I wanted to learn."

Her story offers a glimpse into the deeper transformation sweeping across Bangladesh's ready-made garments (RMG) sector—one that is becoming more efficient and environmentally conscious, but risks becoming less inclusive if women are not actively supported in this transition.

The RMG sector has long been central to women's employment in Bangladesh. In the 1990s, over 80 percent of garment workers were women, many from rural areas with few other options for formal work. These jobs offered not just wages but a pathway to visibility, mobility, and social agency. Today, women make up around 56 percent of the RMG workforce. While demographic shifts contribute to this trend, much of it reflects structural challenges—most notably, automation and changing workplace dynamics.

This is not unique to Bangladesh. In Vietnam, women still constitute about 75–80 percent of the garment workforce and remain a dominant part of the industry, with limited evidence so far of a gendered decline due to automation (International Labour Organization 2025; World Bank 2021). In Cambodia, women have historically accounted for over 80 percent of garment workers and continue to dominate the sector, though longitudinal data on automation's gender impact remain limited (Heintz 2007; ASEAN 2024). In India, by contrast, women comprise a smaller share—around 35–40 percent of garment workers—and their participation has shown modest growth rather than decline, suggesting different structural dynamics at play (International Labour Organization 2021; International Labour Organization 2022). Across all contexts, women remain concentrated in low-paid, repetitive tasks that are among the first to be mechanised.

In Bangladesh, the impact of automation is already evident. A 2024 study by the Business & Human Rights Resource Centre found that technological upgrades have triggered a 30.58 percent reduction in overall employment in several factories, with women hit hardest due to their predominance in easily mechanised roles such as sewing and trimming. The Business Standard also reported that sweater production lines saw a 37.03 percent labour drop, cutting by 48.34 percent, and sewing declined by 26.57 percent—all heavily affecting women workers. According to Kaler Kantho (2025), over 300 factories across Dhaka, Gazipur, and Narayanganj have closed or suspended operations—either temporarily or permanently—resulting in an estimated 200,000 job losses. The report attributes this downturn to automation, high production costs, and declining international orders, noting that women constitute the majority of those displaced. These combined factors demonstrate that while automation boosts productivity, it is also accelerating labour contraction and deepening gender vulnerability in the sector.

FILE PHOTO: PALASH KHAN

The green transition introduces another layer. With increasing pressure from global buyers to meet Environmental, Social and Governance (ESG) benchmarks, factories are installing solar panels, upgrading wastewater treatment systems, and embedding sustainability reporting into operations. These efforts are creating new roles in sustainability, but these too are largely inaccessible to women. An ILO survey (2025) found that only 18 percent of workers in sustainability roles were women, with most of them confined to supplementary tasks such as waste sorting.

Despite their experience, women are rarely considered for technical upskilling. However, targeted training in areas such as energy efficiency, textile-waste management, and compliance roles has shown that women can effectively transition into new green jobs. These findings are supported by research from LightCastle Partners (2025), which emphasises that women, when supported by inclusive training environments, contribute meaningfully to sustainable factory operations.

There are promising examples worth building upon. In several pilot initiatives, women operators trained in green practices—such as safe chemical handling and recycling-process management—were subsequently promoted to roles supporting environmental compliance. While these efforts have been limited in scale, they clearly demonstrate that gender-responsive upskilling is both viable and effective. The next step is not innovation, but commitment—to scale and institutionalise these practices across the sector. Yet persistent barriers continue to hold women back.

Despite comprising the majority of line workers, women represent only about 9 percent of production supervisors. A GIZ study (2024) found that promotion decisions were often shaped by gendered assumptions around leadership, assertiveness, and flexibility—qualities still too frequently attributed to men. Even when women exceed performance expectations, they are routinely passed over due to perceived limitations tied to family responsibilities or emotional disposition.

Other challenges—such as lack of childcare, safe transportation, and unequal domestic responsibilities—continue to limit women's full participation and progression in the sector. Many factories lack grievance mechanisms to address harassment or bias. As a result, promising women talent often drops out of the workforce, leaving the sector poorer in skills, diversity, and resilience.

Some global brands have started to address this imbalance, embedding gender equity into responsible sourcing codes. But most still treat gender as a peripheral issue, separate from core metrics like environmental compliance and productivity. If the RMG sector is to remain competitive and socially responsible, gender must be integrated into every level of industrial and environmental policy. This includes mandating gender-inclusive training, tracking promotion pathways, and recognising suppliers who foster equity alongside compliance.

Buyers should be required to review gender-disaggregated labour data, insist on gender parity in training access, and incentivise suppliers who build inclusive cultures. National policy must also respond to this need. A truly just transition requires legal safeguards, budget allocations, and representation of women in dialogue platforms around technology and sustainability.

The role of sectoral organisations such as BGMEA and worker federations is crucial here. They can amplify women's voices and support initiatives that strengthen peer networks, mentorship, and factory-based leadership forums. Multilateral development partners also have a part to play in piloting inclusive business models and de-risking innovation that opens space for under-represented groups.

One often overlooked dimension of this transition is the interplay between automation, decent work, and the care economy. Many women in the RMG sector are also caregivers at home. Without policies that address unpaid care burdens—through subsidised childcare, flexible work arrangements, or support services—the automation-driven restructuring of labour risks intensifying economic insecurity for women. ILO research (2025) underscores that decent work must be understood holistically, ensuring access not only to jobs but to working conditions that reflect workers' realities.

Finally, the narrative itself must change. Stories like Fatema's are not about weakness; they are about exclusion. Women are not passive recipients of progress; they are capable contributors and leaders if the systems around them allow them to participate fully.

Fatema's voice captures what is at stake: "I don't want sympathy. I want skills. I want to work in the future too." A future that is more efficient and sustainable must also be more inclusive. Women like Fatema should not be sidelined by change—they should be helping to lead it.

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