

A warning, not a surprise

Will we finally invest in earthquake resilience?

Friday morning's 5.7 magnitude earthquake, which led to at least ten fatalities (as reported at 8.45pm, November 21) across the country, should serve as a wake-up call. The quake's epicentre was located in Madhabdi, Narsingdi and strong tremors were felt throughout the country, especially in Dhaka. Several hundred people were injured in the capital and surrounding districts, largely from falling objects and the panic-driven scramble to get outside. Among the injured in the capital, at least six were Dhaka University students, who jumped off their hall buildings in fear.

Residents across the capital rushed onto the streets as the tremors intensified. However, given the density of structures in the city, it is doubtful how safe they would have been had the earthquake caused more infrastructural damage than what has been reported so far. According to the United States Geological Survey (USGS), the quake's shallow depth likely intensified the shaking, increasing the potential for destruction—particularly in densely populated areas with vulnerable structures, such as those found in Dhaka and other cities of the country. Given these conditions, it is nothing short of a miracle that no large-scale damage has been reported, although some structural harm has occurred.

But the question remains: how long can we continue to rely on such miracles? As we have previously warned, small tremors often signal the threat of a larger quake. Scientific data also show that Bangladesh—particularly the Dhaka region—is seismically active due to underlying tectonics, with the Indian plate pushing into the Eurasian plate and the presence of active fault systems. Against this reality, the lack of preparedness we have grown accustomed to is both reckless and incomprehensible. This daily has repeatedly urged the relevant authorities to learn from examples in our own neighbourhood and take necessary measures to prepare the country for potential earthquakes, yet to no avail. Despite experts' warnings that Dhaka could face catastrophic consequences in the event of a major quake, the authorities have maintained a nonchalant attitude, putting millions of lives at risk. Proper monitoring and enforcement of the Bangladesh National Building Code (BNBC) 2020 are almost non-existent, while recent amendments to Dhaka's Detailed Area Plan allow even more high-rise buildings—further increasing population density in an already overcrowded city.

Undoing the harm caused by years of neglect will take time. However, the work must start. Authorities must ensure that the current BNBC is strictly followed, not only in design but also in reinforcement placement. Existing buildings should be retrofitted or demolished if found unsafe. A comprehensive plan, which should include the recruitment and training of rescue-team volunteers as well as a mechanism to routinely inspect and regulate structures and buildings across the country, must be developed immediately. Additionally, extensive public awareness and training programmes are essential. Regular drills in schools, offices, and other public institutions should be implemented as part of preparedness measures, so that injuries and casualties can be minimised during future earthquakes.

Mangrove forests are not expendable

Sitakunda's forests must not be sacrificed for a recreational park

It is deeply concerning to learn of the fate of yet another mangrove forest in Chattogram's Sitakunda upazila, where the district administration has built a recreational park by felling thousands of trees. Reportedly, around 194 acres of land in North Salimpur mauza were officially gazetted as forest land under Section 4 of the Forest Act on January 9, 1986, and later planted with mangroves by the Coastal Forest Division in the 1990-91 fiscal year. Despite this legal protection, the Chattogram district administration constructed the park, claiming the land is recorded in its name in the official *khatian* (record of rights). The forest department and the district administration are now at odds over control of the land.

Under Section 5 of the Forest Act, 1927, land notified under Section 4 and officially gazetted as forest cannot be repurposed. The Supreme Court reinforced this in its October 6, 2013 verdict, emphasising that such forest land must be preserved. Yet, despite repeated objections from forest officials, the district administration reportedly proceeded to develop DC Park, felling at least 5,000 trees and erecting structures, restaurants, seating areas, and pathways. Satellite imagery from 2018 to 2025 confirms the scale of habitat loss.

We have witnessed similar patterns of institutional overreach many times in the past. Just as the Roads and Highways Department sought 174 acres inside a reserve forest to widen a road, and the Bangladesh Rural Electrification Board (Palli Bidyut) attempted to install power lines through another reserved forest—both ignoring the forest department's objections—here too a government authority moved ahead without resolving legal and ecological concerns. The question remains: why do state agencies treat forests as vacant land, rather than as legally safeguarded ecosystems essential for the country's climate safety? Mangrove belts in Sitakunda and Mirsarai have repeatedly proven their value, shielding communities from major cyclones while reducing storm surges and erosion. These forests are frontline protectors of our coastline, sustaining biodiversity and safeguarding human lives. Clearing them removes this vital shield, leaving coastal communities exposed to cyclones, flooding, and irreversible ecological damage. If control of the land is restored to the forest department, it could be transformed into a coastal greenbelt, strengthening natural defences while supporting wildlife, water systems, and air quality. The government must, therefore, resolve the ongoing dispute between the forest department and the Chattogram district administration and act decisively to protect Sitakunda's mangrove forests.

EDITORIAL

Our winter is fading, but the world remains indifferent



BLOWIN' IN
THE WIND

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Once upon a time, there was a season called winter. It was nicely tucked between late autumn (Hemonto) and spring (Boshonto) in a deck of six seasons. It was a time when nature would drape our cities and villages in a soft white shawl. Glasses of fresh date juice were sold from earthen pots to the early risers. The jaggery (*nolen gur*) made from date juice was the hallmark of the season which would find its way into various pitha and payesh. The golden glow of mustard fields would signal the merrymaking that goes on in the village fairs featuring *lathi khela*, *putul naach*, and *nagor dola*. That time, by 2100, is gone.

The Daily Star cites climate scientists to warn of a time when winter will vanish from our season cycle by 2100. The news sent a chill down the spine; mourning becomes winter. It's not only a season that is vanishing. It is a feeling that a time of the year that defined who we are is not going to be there. My generation can sense its fleeting years, but to think our next generation will not experience winter is a sobering fact. A pause in the calendar that made the otherwise hot and humid year feel complete is dissolving. And the land of six seasons will feel like one long, unbroken summer.

I may sound poetic, but, as Ezra Pound has put it, "poetry is news that stays news." And the news is: Bangladesh is warming by roughly 0.16 degrees Celsius per decade, and winter nights in Dhaka are warming at nearly 0.45 degrees Celsius per decade. Bangladesh's average temperature can potentially rise by up to 4.5 degrees Celsius by 2100. As the unused blanket lies folded near my feet and November nights are drowned out by the drone of ceiling fans, I fear the fearmongering scientists are right.

Winter is more than a season. It is our way of life—a tradition. What happens to the fanfares of winter when the air is no longer cold enough for the dew to set in, fog to rise, the crops to be moist, birds to migrate, or people to gather around woodfires? Warming erases culture as surely as it changes climate. And it will change our agriculture, too: rice, wheat, mustard and winter vegetables need specific low temperatures to grow properly. The change in temperature will confuse the animals that hibernate, impacting the number of insect pollinators. This in turn will affect flowering cycles and stress livestock. The lack of cold

will allow mosquitoes to thrive and worsen vector-borne diseases like dengue and chikungunya. Meanwhile, the steel and glass structures of our cities will continue to trap heat and add to the weather, turning winter into an unending extension of summer. To think of winter-related outdoor activities and outerwear as nostalgic relics of the past will further shape livelihoods. People who depend on these items will have to reinvent their purposes.

pre monsoon heatwaves in western regions could last up to 20 days, and by the century's end, nearly 70 of the 90 pre monsoon days may experience heatwave conditions," the report claims. It does not mention the larger picture awaiting the Bengal Delta. The Himalayan glaciers that feed our great rivers—Padma, Jamuna, and Meghna—are melting at alarming rates due to this global warming. Scientists predict that while meltwater may initially increase river flow, the long-term consequence is catastrophic: reduced dry-season water, erratic monsoon pulses, and destabilised sediment cycles. This means the delta, already fragile, becomes more vulnerable to both drought and sudden flooding. The situation will be compounded by the sea level rise. The Bay of Bengal is warming faster than the global average. We may lose 12-18 percent of our coastal areas by 2100. The saltwater intrusion due to the rise of seawater

coming and the planet beneath our feet is shifting, we are told to "adapt," "build resilience," and craft a "just transition." For us, there is no short supply of words.

We need climate negotiators. We need to ensure technology transfer. The countries most capable of helping through clean energy innovations, climate-resistant agriculture, and affordable mitigation technologies hold tightly onto their patents like inherited privileges. To translate words into action, we need to have equitable access to these resources. We need a fair system of climate credits that ensures countries like Bangladesh have equitable access to the tools, financing, and innovations required to adapt and thrive in a warming world. At the same time, we cannot eternally wait for the world to fix our problem. We need to build resources of our own. Climate education needs to go beyond five-star hotel conferences and university seminars. Children at



With winter gone, what will happen to our rice, wheat, mustard and winter vegetables that need specific low temperatures to grow properly?

FILE PHOTO: STAR

Then again, you might think a lot can happen in the next 20 years to make many of these issues irrelevant anyway. But there is no harm in preparing for what to expect from these changes. Winter is becoming weird. In many places in the global North, winter storms are becoming recurrent. This allows climate change deniers to suggest that global warming is a hoax, as is evident by the severe cold experienced by Europe and North America. But the weather oddities need to be seen against the climate change patterns.

The report, jointly prepared by the Bangladesh Meteorological Department and the Norwegian Meteorological Institute, also claims the country may face extreme heat almost throughout the year. "By the 2070s,

coupled with human encroachment can pose an existential threat to the Sundarbans. In short, we are witnessing a slow death of the delta; it is losing its ability to protect, feed, and sustain us.

In the story of a warming world, the Bengal Delta is the frontline, and its wounds are already visible. And yet, at every COP summit, the same question hovers in the air: why are those who contributed the least to global emissions suffering the most? Bangladesh emits almost nothing compared to industrialised nations, but we remain one of the worst victims. During the first phases of industrialisation, when the Western factories belched carbon for centuries, exploiting fortunes of the colonies and building their futures on fossil fuels, no compensation was given. Now, when the winter is not

schools must learn not only the names of Bangladesh's six seasons but also what threatens their survival. They should understand why trees matter, why plastic chokes our drains, and why heat rises in cities strangled by concrete. Responsibility begins with knowing, and knowing must start early.

We are a small country, but not so in numbers. Our voice needs to be loud and responsible. While we adopt better policies, greener cities, sustainable agriculture, keeping both ethnic and cultural diversity in mind, we need to demand that climate justice is not a charity. We must remind the world that losing winter is not only about losing cool days; it is about losing natural balance, identity, memory, rhythm, and heritage. The chilled glass of date juice today should not be the trace of a dying culture.

Water security demands inclusion of women's voices



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Water sustains life, but it also reflects inequality. In Bangladesh, discussions on water security often centre on floods, salinity, or urban scarcity, while one crucial aspect remains overlooked: gender. Women and girls carry a disproportionate share of the burden in managing water for their families, yet their needs and voices are seldom reflected in policy or planning.

Across the country, women are primarily responsible for the labour-intensive and time-consuming task of collecting, storing, and managing household water. In many rural areas, women walk long distances to fetch water, sometimes waiting hours at crowded water points. According to Unicef, women and children worldwide spend a combined 200 million hours each day collecting water. In developing countries, they may spend up to six hours daily on this chore, walking nearly six kilometres on average. Even in areas where pumps have been installed, women still spend long hours collecting water due to waiting time. A similar situation persists in Bangladesh's coastal villages and urban slums, where access to safe water remains unreliable

and unequal.

During droughts, floods, or riverbank erosion, the time spent fetching water increases sharply. This extra effort often comes at the expense of girls' education, women's resting time, or income opportunities. Beyond the physical strain, the constant anxiety of ensuring safe water for the family creates an invisible psychological burden that rarely appears in official statistics.

Climate change is intensifying these inequalities. Erratic rainfall, rising salinity, and recurring floods have already disrupted freshwater sources across Bangladesh. Women are forced to adapt—walking farther, carrying and storing more, or negotiating with neighbours and local authorities—all while maintaining their regular domestic responsibilities.

Urban areas tell a similar story. Dhaka, Chattogram, and other cities face severe water stress.

Irregular supply, low pressure, and contamination compel households to rely on tube wells, shared taps, or informal vendors. Even where piped water exists, women still manage the

household's daily water use—cooking, washing, cleaning—while resolving issues with landlords or municipal suppliers. When water runs short or becomes contaminated, it is women who bear the immediate consequences and find coping strategies.

The gendered dimension of water insecurity extends beyond household labour. Access to clean water shapes education, health, and livelihoods. Girls often miss school when sanitation facilities are inadequate or when fetching water conflicts with class hours. During menstruation, lack of access to water and privacy exacerbates absenteeism and poor hygiene. Many women reduce or forgo paid work to manage household water needs, losing valuable income and autonomy. Yet, despite their central role, women remain underrepresented in decision-making—from community water user groups to national policy platforms.

While Bangladesh has made progress in water access and climate adaptation, most strategies still treat water scarcity as a technical or environmental issue rather than a social one. Policies often overlook the gendered realities of who collects, stores, and manages water. Without a deliberate gender lens, such programmes risk reinforcing the very inequalities they aim to solve.

Encouragingly, there are examples that show what inclusive approaches can achieve. Women-led water committees, gender-sensitive WASH programmes, and participatory planning initiatives have improved both efficiency and sustainability. Where

women are involved, water systems are better maintained and hygiene practices are stronger. These initiatives demonstrate that empowering women in water governance strengthens entire communities.

To create lasting change, gender equality must be built into every level of water management from infrastructure design to disaster preparedness. This includes collecting sex-disaggregated data, conducting gender-responsive research, ensuring women's representation in decision-making bodies, and promoting technologies that reduce their workload. Recognising the unpaid labour women perform in managing water is also essential to designing fair and effective policies. Simple measures, such as reducing the distance to safe water points, ensuring privacy in sanitation facilities, or involving women in planning, can significantly reduce burdens while improving health and education outcomes.

Bangladesh's journey toward water security cannot succeed without closing the gender gap. Women are not passive victims of scarcity; they are central actors in water management and adaptation. Listening to them, addressing their needs, and valuing their contributions will not only promote gender justice but also enhance national resilience to climate and environmental challenges. Therefore, recognising and responding to the hidden gender gap in water security is no longer optional; it is essential for building a more sustainable and just Bangladesh.