



Speakers at a roundtable titled "Violence Against Women Survey 2024: Translating evidence into action" held at The Daily Star centre yesterday.

PHOTO: PRABIR DAS

## When danger strikes, where can women turn?

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### POLICE MOST KNOWN AUTHORITY

The local police station remains the most recognised authority, cited by 91 percent of women who know where to report.

Much fewer identified other authorities: 32 percent mentioned Union or Upazila Parishads, 13 percent village mediators, and 10 percent courts.

One Stop Crisis Centres (OCCs) remain largely unknown, with only 2 percent of women aware of them despite operating for decades.

Knowledge of helplines is similarly low. Only 12 percent of women know about MoWCA's 109 helpline, compared with 45 percent aware of 999. Urban women remain far more informed than rural.

Regional gaps persist: Mymensingh reports the highest awareness of 109 (17 percent), while Sylhet records the lowest (10 percent for 109 and 31 percent for 999). Dhaka remains below average for 109 awareness (9 percent) despite higher recognition of 999 (49 percent).

Among survivors, awareness shrinks further: only 9 percent know about 109 and 39 percent about 999. Never-married women are the most informed, while divorced, separated, or widowed women know the least about available services.

Dr Fauzia Moslem, president of Bangladesh Mahila Parishad, told The Daily Star, "Despite the establishment of helplines, police helpdesks and One-Stop Crisis Centres, we have failed to create real pathways for women to access them. We're spending the budget and allocating resources, but if awareness stays this low, it is deeply alarming, and the funds are wasted. Raising awareness must become a top priority."

She said services often operate without long-term planning. "Projects run somehow, but without proper recurring budgets and gender-responsive planning, they cannot improve. We need coordinated planning and real accountability; sporadic activities will not bring change."

Highlighting the reliance on unregulated local mediators, she stressed the need for trained paralegals, sensitised UP chairmen, and a clearer dispute-resolution framework. "Without this, given our caseload and court delays, justice will continue to fail women."

She warned that informal mediation often leads to unsafe settlements, including past cases where survivors were forced to marry their rapists.

### WHERE TO TURN

To guide women needing immediate support, The Daily Star consulted police, emergency helplines, MoWCA, and NGOs working on gender-based violence.

Inspector Anwar Sattar of the National Emergency Helpline 999 said the National Emergency Service Guidelines 2020 classify any violence, harassment, or stalking against women and children as an emergency.

"Women, children, or someone reporting on their behalf can call 999," he said.

From January October 2025, 999 provided emergency support to 26,317 callers under the "Violence Against Women and Children" category. These included 14,928 domestic torture cases, 5,810 assaults by others, 988 rapes, 557 attempted rapes, 793 stalking incidents, 647 homicides, 801

sexual harassment cases, 465 parental torture cases, and 2,798 calls about child marriage.

Anwar noted that services remain fragmented and stressed the need for a single, widely known emergency number.

Assistant Inspector General of Police (Media and Public Relations) AHM Shahadat Hossain said Police Headquarters launched a 24-hour hotline on March 10, 2025, ensuring

round-the-clock support for women facing violence or sexual abuse.

For digital threats, the Police Cyber Support for Women offers legal aid and protection, he said.

Meanwhile, MoWCA offers a wide range of services. Dr Prakash Kanti Chowdhury, joint secretary, said the newly launched Quick Response Team provides immediate rescue, medical treatment, psychosocial counselling, legal aid, cyber violence redress, shelter, safe spaces, and security.

The 24-hour toll-free 109 helpline provides rescue, legal and psychosocial support, health referrals, child marriage prevention, and guidance on cyber violence.

Fourteen OCCs offer integrated services including health care, legal support, police coordination, case management, counselling, shelter access, DNA testing, rehabilitation, and reintegration.

National and Regional Trauma Counselling Centres provide psychosocial and community-based counselling, while 67 OCCs at district and upazila levels also provide services.

Dr Prakash added that OCCs will expand to 37 medical college hospitals and 95 district and upazila cells, while the 109 helpline is being strengthened with better staffing and dedicated counsellors to ensure zero call drops.

The ministry, he said, is prioritising prevention through school, college, and institution-based interventions, and partnering with the religious affairs ministry to reach madrasas. "Community engagement through social media, content creation, and pocket legal guides will support outreach."

He also noted that District Legal Aid Offices in all 64 districts offer support to women and children facing physical, psychological, sexual, or domestic abuse.

### FRONTLINE ORGANISATIONS

With many survivors unsure of where to seek help, frontline legal aid organisations remain essential, offering support women may avoid seeking from police or courts due to stigma or legal complications.

These organisations guide survivors through legal procedures, represent them in court, and ensure their voices are heard safely," said Advocate Nighat Seema of Bangladesh National Women Lawyers' Association.

"They also offer counselling, shelter, and reintegration support, particularly for rural and vulnerable women who may not know where to turn."

Bangladesh Legal Aid and Services Trust, through 24 district offices and clinics, provides legal support from lower courts to the Supreme Court, raises awareness, offers legal advice, mediates cases, and pursues public interest litigation, said BLAST Director Mahbuba Akter.

Platforms like Cyber Support for Women and Children, run by BLAST with Cybercrime Awareness Foundation and Naripokkho, enable reporting of online abuse and provide legal, counselling, and referral services.

The Rape Law Reform Coalition -- 17 organisations including ASK, icddr,b, ActionAid, WDDF, Naripokkho, and BLAST -- advocates for rape law reform and provides legal and psychosocial support for survivors.

"When women do not know where to turn, abuse becomes normalised, and breaking that silence requires strong awareness from the state, police, and media," Advocate Seema warned.

"Please also advise us on what additional features could be introduced in the app," he said.

He said involving young people in natural hazard planning and technological initiatives can mentally prepare for survivors.

Chittagong University Prof Jahangir Alam said special attention must be given to hospitals, educational institutions, electricity and gas connections, and that introducing earthquake-related programmes in schools, colleges and universities will foster awareness rather than panic.

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### WHERE TO REPORT ABUSE

#### NATIONAL EMERGENCY HELPLINE 999

Immediate police, fire, ambulance for violence, harassment, threats, abduction, stalking

#### VAW & CHILD HELPLINE 109

Rescue, legal aid, psychosocial help, child marriage prevention, cyber violence support

#### CHILD HELPLINE 1098

Immediate protection and referrals for child abuse, exploitation, trafficking, neglect

#### NATIONAL LEGAL AID HELPLINE 16430

Free legal advice and lawyers for women and children facing any form of abuse

#### POLICE HQ WOMEN'S HOTLINE (24/7) 01320002001 / 01320002002 / 01320002222

Violence, harassment, sexual assault. Police assistance

#### POLICE CYBER SUPPORT FOR WOMEN 01320000888

Cyber harassment, threats, blackmail, image misuse. Legal and safety support.

#### QUICK RESPONSE TEAM 01713659573 / 01713659574

Rescue, medical care, counselling, legal aid, cyber violence redress, safe shelter

#### WOMEN WITH DISABILITIES DEVELOPMENT FOUNDATION 01711477348

Counselling, legal aid, crisis support tailored for women and children with disabilities.

## Form task force

recommendations to us quickly in written form; the government is prepared to take all necessary measures," he urged experts.

He said work is underway to form the required expert committee and one or more task forces, and that action will be taken as soon as recommendations are received.

He said it is also necessary to assess the stage the country is currently at in terms of earthquake readiness.

The chief adviser said Bangladeshi scientists and earthquake specialists residing abroad should be consulted and institutions working on earthquake issues must

strengthen collaboration with foreign organisations.

He said the government has developed an app called "Shubhechha" for expatriate Bangladeshis and asked experts to help connect with scientists abroad through it.

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He said while the likelihood of a major earthquake in Bangladesh is

relatively low, adequate preparedness is essential.

Another DU professor, Humayun Akhter, said plans of action must be developed at four levels -- indoor, outdoor, individual and institutional -- and communicated widely.

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## Normalisation of abuse

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mob attacks, moral policing and religious restrictions eroding women's rights.

Shireen, also head of the Women's Affairs Reform Commission, said that without challenging ideas of male ownership and entrenched toxic masculinity, large interventions would again deliver only partial results.

Bangladesh Mahila Parishad General Secretary Maleka Bano described the situation as a "serious human rights violation and humanitarian crisis".

She said violence had spread beyond homes and intimate partners into public spaces. "Hard-won rights were being weakened in the name of cultural and religious values and even under movements that claim to be inclusive. We must defend the rights we have already gained."

ActionAid Bangladesh Country Director Farah Kabir said violence had become so normalised that a woman's walk, speech or dress could draw attacks. "People don't believe in institutions. There is deep mistrust."

Survivors in marginalised communities, she said, were often diverted from courts to arbitration led by local powerbrokers, where political actors "settle" cases, including rape, for money.

She called for greater investment in education, health, mental health and digital protections, saying rhetoric alone could not change women's realities.

The Daily Star Joint Editor Aasha Mehreen Amin said, "Every year we get these statistics and they keep getting worse. It's a grim scenario."

Urging political, religious and state leaders to take responsibility, she said that unless decision-makers commit to this change, nothing is going to happen.

Jahangirnagar University Associate Professor Rezwana Karim Snigdha said the survey provided strong empirical support but warned that "normative violence" -- teaching boys that manhood is tied to controlling women -- remained deeply rooted.

Violence had become "hybrid", she said, combining physical, digital, religious, caste and class-based harms.

BRAC Associate Director Shashwatee Biplob said rape cases filed and shared online showed how perpetrators now treat violence as "a source of pride".

She said BRAC's nationwide experience showed that helplines and crisis centres often failed to provide meaningful support. "We must ask why years of development interventions have not reduced violence. We need gender politics, not partisan politics."

Dhaka University Professor Samina Luthifa said tackling violence required a national approach and could not be left to higher education institutions alone. "Survivors often struggle to navigate systems such as One Stop Crisis Centres. The judicial process remains a major barrier because law enforcement and the judiciary often hold different interpretations of violence."

She said university anti sexual-harassment cells were overstretched, underfunded and lacked trained staff. Severe cyberbullying of women in public life, she warned, was pushing younger activists out of political spaces.

Media professional Kazi Jesin said a

new trend of violence had emerged in politics. "After August 5, many hoped gender inequalities would shrink, yet politics has shown us the opposite. Women who speak about rights are being labelled with degrading slurs, even by those in authority...."

She said digital mobs target women the moment they appear online and called for updated laws and recognition of online abuse.

Deputy Inspector General of Police (Special Security and Protection Battalion) Shoeb Reaz Alam said only a small fraction of survivors file cases. "Most confide only in relatives because many believe it is impossible to file a case against husbands or in-laws while living in the same home."

UNFPA Bangladesh Representative Catherine Breen Kamkong noted how normalised violence had become and criticised the current ad hoc approach, saying scattered projects and small prevention efforts were insufficient. "We need coordinated and comprehensive action," she said, urging political parties to elevate the issue.

"Without addressing discrimination and violence wider social or electoral transformation would remain impossible."

Emeritus Scientist at icddr,b Ruchira Tabassum; Corinne Thevoz of the Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation; Tahera Jabeen of the British High Commission; Stéphanie St Laurent of the High Commission of Canada; and Esha Aurora, business editor of New Age, also spoke.

The roundtable was moderated by Tanjim Ferdous, in charge of NGOs and foreign missions at The Daily Star.

## Antibiotics not working

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meaning antibiotic efficacy dropped under that threshold.

The data also reveal that Pan-Drug-Resistant (PDR) organisms -- resistant to all tested antibiotics -- were found in 7 percent of all specimens and in 41 percent of ICU samples. Acinetobacter, a kind of bacteria, showed the highest rate of suspected PDR at 27 percent.

Prof Habib called this "a real threat, especially in ICUs".

He said 46 percent of overall samples contained multidrug-resistant (MDR) pathogens, while MDR prevalence in ICUs was 89 percent.

The most common pathogen identified was E. coli (35 percent), followed by K. pneumoniae (19.2 percent).

Among WHO's critical priority pathogens, ceftriaxone resistance in

K. pneumoniae rose from 40.1 percent in 2022 to 52.2 percent in 2025.

Resistance to meropenem -- a widely used watch group drug -- increased from 46.7 percent to 71 percent over the same period.

WHO divides antibiotics into three categories -- Access, Watch, and Reserve -- to guide proper use. Access-group drugs should be used as first- or second-line treatments. Yet the use of watch-group antibiotics rose sharply to 91 percent this year.

"This increasing reliance on watch-group antibiotics is deeply alarming," Prof Habib said.

IEDCR recommended that culture and sensitivity tests be performed before prescribing antibiotics to ensure the right drug is used. It also stressed strict infection prevention and control practices and stronger antibiotic

stewardship to reduce pressure on commonly used drugs.

At the event, Prof Sheikh Sayidul Haque, additional director general (planning and development) of the Directorate General of Health Services (DGHS), said self-medication and antibiotics prescribed by unregistered practitioners continue to fuel misuse. He acknowledged that even registered doctors do not always follow proper prescribing procedures.

Abu Hussain Md Moinul Ahsan, director (hospital) of DGHS, said infection control in hospitals remains challenging due to overwhelming patient loads but noted efforts are underway to improve the situation.