

## Salinity's vicious toll on women's health

A crisis that can no longer be ignored

The devastating consequences of salinity on the lives and livelihoods of people in the coastal areas are well known. A recent investigation by *The Daily Star* has revealed an equally alarming and often overlooked dimension of this crisis: its brutal toll on women's health. Across Khulna and Satkhira, women are suffering from severe reproductive and skin-related conditions that are altering the course of their lives, ushering in early menopause, forcing hysterectomies, and increasing the risk of cancer. Many endure chronic infections in silence, often left untreated for years due to stigma, poor access to healthcare services, or geographical inaccessibility.

Women engaged in shrimp farming spend hours standing waist-deep in saline water to catch shrimp fry to support their families. They drink salty water, wash and bathe with it, and work in it daily. The results are chronic skin diseases, urinary tract infections, and serious reproductive health complications. This is also supported by recent data. According to a 2024 Journal of Migration and Health study, 64.8 percent of women in Mongla and 53.8 percent in Shyamnagar, Satkhira, reported inflammation or infections of the vagina, uterus, fallopian tubes, or ovaries. Nearly one-third struggle to maintain menstrual hygiene. Severe skin problems affect 92 percent of women in Shyamnagar and nearly 70 percent in Mongla.

An icddr,b analysis covering 2012-2017 further showed that women living near the coastline face 1.3 times higher risk of miscarriage than those in higher-elevation areas. Hypertension, exacerbated by salinity, is quite common, increasing the likelihood of pre-eclampsia in pregnant women. Despite these problems, however, successive governments have ignored the crisis of salinity in coastal areas. Unregulated shrimp farming has contaminated soil and water, devastated agricultural land, and made safe drinking water increasingly scarce. The health fallout—especially for women and girls—has now become impossible to overlook.

We urge the authorities to treat this as a public health emergency. While long-term policy reforms, including strict regulation of shrimp farming, are essential, immediate interventions cannot wait. Access to safe drinking water and sanitation must be ensured through investments in rainwater harvesting, desalination technologies, and other measures, prioritising the most affected areas. Health services must also be expanded in remote areas by establishing mobile clinics, deploying more female health workers, and subsidising diagnostic and reproductive health services. Large-scale awareness must be launched on the risks of prolonged saline exposure, the importance of hygiene, and the need to seek timely medical attention. It is equally important that, besides government authorities, political parties too help in addressing salinity as both a development and public health priority in these regions.

## Time to ensure justice in trafficking cases

New law responds to concerns over alarming acquittal rates

We welcome the government's approval of a new ordinance that aims to prevent human trafficking and the smuggling of migrant workers by introducing comprehensive remedial measures. At a time when the overwhelming majority of such cases end in acquittal, the initiative signals a long-overdue recognition that the country's legal and institutional framework has failed some of its most vulnerable citizens. Updating the existing law to align with international standards and clearly define offences related to migrant smuggling—long legally undefined despite its widespread occurrence—is a step in the right direction. Of course, law alone is not enough. But having a proper law can enable effective investigation, prosecution, and ultimately justice for victims.

A review of official case-disposal records paints a grim picture of how trafficking cases have fared so far. In 2020, the courts disposed of 14 cases, and 13 of them ended in acquittal. In 2021, both disposed cases ended in acquittal. In 2022, all 34 disposed cases met the same fate. The volume of disposed cases surged in 2023 but the acquittal rate remained disturbingly similar, with 415 of 436 cases ending in acquittal. In 2024, out of 363 cases 342 cases resulted in acquittal. Even the first six months of 2025 followed the same pattern, with 132 of 141 disposed cases ending in acquittal. These figures do not suggest the absence of crime, but rather the weakness of investigations, the confusion in legal categorisation, and the inability of our system to hold perpetrators to account.

The new law intends to address these gaps. The decision to introduce a separate chapter on the smuggling of migrants (SOM) is particularly noteworthy as an average of 95 percent of SOM cases ended in acquittal over the last four and a half years, largely due to misclassification. It also addresses the growing use of online platforms for "job recruitment" by traffickers, while limiting the influence of the accused by allowing the freezing of bank accounts, seizing of assets, and restricting of travel during investigation, with court approval of course. Meanwhile, the provision of improved witness protection and safeguards to prevent victims from being pressured into withdrawing complaints could strengthen cases that previously fell apart under intimidation.

However, as we have already noted, law alone is insufficient. Many of those who fall victim to traffickers or smugglers do so out of desperation, poverty, and a lack of safe, legal migration pathways. So if the ordinance is to achieve its stated objective, it must be accompanied by robust implementation, proper training for law enforcement and prosecutors, and sustained awareness campaigns in high-risk communities. Only then can we succeed in suppressing human trafficking.

## THIS DAY IN HISTORY

### Rosa Park refuses to give up her bus seat

On this day in 1955, in violation of segregation laws in Montgomery, Alabama, Rosa Parks refused to surrender her bus seat to a white passenger and was arrested, sparking a 381-day bus boycott led by Martin Luther King, Jr.

# EDITORIAL

## Are our schools inherently designed to fail?



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Views expressed in this article are the author's own.

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That our school education is in disarray is not news. It has been in public discussion, though it captures the media's attention whenever a new instance of its dysfunction is revealed. However, a way to address the problems and move towards better outcomes remains elusive.

The most recent Multiple Indicators Cluster Survey (MICS) by the Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics, with Unicef's support, has drawn public attention again to the woes of the secondary education system. According to MICS, only 44 percent of the secondary school-age children complete secondary education up to class ten. In other words, more than half of our young people do not have a secondary education, though 84 percent of children complete primary education. The report also shows income-based, gender-based and geographical disparities.

The statistics in the survey only mention children's participation in school, not what they learn or whether they acquire the knowledge and competence expected at primary and secondary level education.

That the majority of our young people are not earning a secondary education qualification and a large gap exists in children's education opportunities between primary and secondary stages, is shocking. However, it does not surprise education decision-makers and citizens, who are concerned about our children's education. If one were to probe a little into how the public school system runs—the policies and plans, financial investments and management, teachers' skills and professionalism, and the accountability of the actors—one might wonder whether the schools are actually designed to fail rather than run to achieve results.

Let's look at a few facts that are already known but usually considered in isolation. When put together and holistically viewed, a damning pattern of a large mismatch is revealed between the stated goals and objectives of the school system and the ways, means and resources provided to achieve the outcomes.

The international goal for developing countries, according to the Sustainable Development Goals for education (SDG4), is to ensure equitable, inclusive and quality education up to secondary level for all children by 2030. Bangladesh has pledged its support to this goal, but

has no plan or programme with a time frame and strategy prepared for this purpose. Nevertheless, the primary level, despite its many shortcomings, has a compulsory education law and an implementation plan. This situation explains the major gap in student participation between primary and secondary education.

The absence of a public obligation to provide quality secondary education to children has led to haphazard and incoherent policies and management.

Schools cannot perform without a sufficient number of teachers with the necessary professional skills. The "staffing plan" applied for government salary subvention (known as MPO) to schools is mostly inadequate for the number of students and subjects. Even then, there are very often significant vacancies in teaching positions. Even government schools have 20 percent vacancies. The government staffing plan provides for 53 teaching positions in a collegiate school in the capital with 2000 students, but only 39 teachers were working at the school in September this year.

School management suffers due to the absence of a headmaster or an assistant headmaster's leadership. The



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VISUAL: ANWAR SOHEL

school in every community. The secondary gross enrolment rate is about 70 percent, of whom over one-third drop out before completing SSC (adding up to over half of the young people not having secondary education as reported in the survey). Of about 20,000 secondary schools and institutions, only 628 are fully supported by the government; 97 percent of secondary schools receive government support through a subvention for the basic salary of a set number of teachers. This is widely considered to be inadequate both in terms of the financial resources available to schools and the number and quality of teachers they require. There are chronic shortages of qualified subject teachers for English, math, science, computer science and

Bangladesh Bureau of Educational Information and Statistics (BANBEIS) reported that in 2023, out of 628 government secondary schools, only 352 had a headmaster (schools recently brought under government have no formal headmaster's position yet). A large number of headmaster positions remain vacant. Bureaucratic inertia and a weak sense of responsibility are evident in this and other instances.

Besides, teachers do not have a career path; most start as assistant teachers and retire from the same position. A senior teacher category was created in 2018, but few were promoted to that post, and it has stopped entirely since 2021. This is hardly a formula for attracting talented people to teaching and encouraging them to perform.

The Education Watch 2023 report

indicates that three-fourths of the students, both in cities and villages, go to private tutors and coaching centres and 93 percent rely on commercial guidebooks to prepare for their exams. This shows students cannot depend on classroom teaching, but more importantly, it adds hugely to the family's expenses. School education has been turned into a commodity; only those who can pay can claim it.

The rough picture presented here indicates how the basic conditions necessary for a school to perform are lacking. We have not even mentioned other concerns, such as the design and plan of the curriculum and the learning content, and the need to translate the curriculum into classroom learning activities. We have also not discussed the objectives of education: defining the subjective and objective aims and skills and competencies that learners must acquire and how these are measured and assessed. Furthermore, there are infrastructure and physical learning environment problems. All these add to the layers of complexity and problems that the education system has to address.

This disarray has not arisen suddenly. It has been in the making for a long time, primarily from neglect by the country's political system and power structure. The interim government also appears to have shied away from embarking on an education reform initiative, which it tried to take in several other areas. Belatedly, the Ministry of Education has appointed a 10-member consultative committee (headed by this writer), giving it the task to "examine prevailing teaching-learning, training and capacity-building, research and management structure in secondary education; consult with various stakeholders; and present necessary recommendations for improving the quality and standard of teaching learning and management in secondary education." A time frame of three months has been set for this task.

A similar consultative committee was formed last November by the Ministry of Primary and Mass Education. Its 200-page report with 100-plus recommendations under eight main categories was submitted to the government in February this year.

The Secondary Education Consultative Committee has begun its work in earnest. It expects to undertake the analysis and stakeholder consultation and prepare its recommendations within the given time frame. The committee is working on the premise that its recommendations will help set the agenda for action for the elected government that will emerge following the upcoming referendum and parliamentary election. It also hopes that the legacy of past governments' neglect will not continue.

## Time to introduce a one-stop digital financial service for migrants



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Twenty-seven billion dollars flowed into Bangladesh in 2024, not from global donors or foreign investors, but from taxi drivers in Dubai, nurses in London, and construction workers in Riyadh. According to the Bangladesh Bank, nearly 13 million 1.3 crore Bangladeshis working abroad sent home this record-breaking sum.

They are our remittance warriors, the backbone of our economy, yet when they return, at various institutions, we greet them with long queues, indifferent counters and financial systems designed for everyone except them.

Every month, these workers send the dollars that keep our reserves stable, feed lakhs of families, and power our economic resilience. But remittance shouldn't end with a cash pickup. It should begin a financial journey, one that unlocks savings, insurance, investment, housing, and education.

What we need is a unified digital ecosystem that can utilise existing wallets or apps to turn every remittance

into an opportunity—a platform that recognises each migrant worker as a valued lifetime client, not a one-time transaction.

Every dollar sent through formal channels builds a digital identity—a data trail that can open doors to credit, investment, and long-term stability. In contrast, the hundi route, which still handles an estimated 25 to 30 percent of flows, offers a quick fix today but no documentation, no protection, and no legacy. Hundi gives you cash; the formal system gives you a future. Every unrecorded dollar is a lost credit history, a lost opportunity to buy land, secure a loan, or invest in a child's education.

moves, his savings goal updates, and an insurance suggestion pops up, all in Bangla. Now imagine a digital home where every transfer connects to opportunity: micro-savings, insurance for parents, home loans, auto-financing, even lifestyle services like travel or education. When he comes home, that same ecosystem should welcome him back, not with paperwork, but with pride.

Technology has already made this possible. Artificial intelligence can now understand Bangla, respond to voice commands, and interact with empathy. Bangladesh Bank is piloting AI-powered Bangla chatbots with commercial banks. Picture a worker in Dubai saying, "Send 500 dirhams home and tell me how much I've saved this year." Within seconds, his money

This isn't about selling more products—it's about designing dignity into every service, recognising that behind every transaction is a story, a family, a future.

To make it real, we need simpler digital know your customer (KYC), open APIs connecting banks and fintechs, and human-centred design tested with real migrants abroad. The

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goal isn't digitisation. It's belonging. Our remittance heroes carried this economy through crises. They built homes they rarely live in and funded educations they never received. They deserve an infrastructure that mirrors their resilience and respect.

This isn't charity. It's nation-building. They carried us this far. Now it's our turn to carry them forward, with dignity, opportunity, and a digital home they can finally call their own.