

Bangladesh’s future in the shadow of gender violence

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Such vulnerability is heightened by poverty, lack of education, child marriage, dowry practices, and climate change-related disasters, which can increase family stress and displacement, leading to more violence. When efforts are made to reduce such vulnerabilities, evidence shows that educating women and girls lowers prevalence, while husbands’ education has an even stronger effect in reducing violence against women. These findings help identify major values that need to change and areas of intervention to reduce violence against women. Such violence is fuelled by deeply entrenched social norms and biases that devalue women, economic dependency, and a lack of awareness about rights and support services. Moreover, the construction of ‘women as possessions or objects’ is one of the root causes that makes women vulnerable to violence. Parents, fearful about ensuring the safety of such a possession, often try to marry girls off while they are still children, and in most cases with a heavy dowry, which in turn causes violence against these children to become more rampant. Nonetheless, stigma, fear of social isolation, and insufficient legal enforcement often prevent survivors from seeking help.

The governance mechanisms of statecraft come into the equation when attempting to solve the puzzle of reducing violence against women. Bangladesh’s governments, for decades, have taken many policy decisions to stop or reduce gender-based violence, but without much success. During the



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KEY POINTS

1. Enforce GBV laws strictly, ensuring accountability for perpetrators and protection for survivors.
2. Strengthen education for women and girls while implementing targeted programmes for men and boys.
3. Guarantee women’s economic independence through education, formal employment, and inheritance rights.
4. Establish survivor-centred support systems with accessible medical, legal, and psychosocial services.
5. Integrate gender justice into governance, policing, and public institutions to end impunity.

July uprising of 2024, like other mass uprisings, we witnessed the en masse presence of women on the streets and in the organisation of the uprising. While women came down on the streets of Dhaka and other major cities, they also faced different kinds of violence from

state forces as well as Awami League’s political henchmen. While collecting data from more than nine thousand July women, we encountered women who consistently feared being sexually harassed by those aforementioned forces when they joined the movement. For them, therefore, joining the street protests always came with an additional burden: the fear of being sexually violated.

Post-July, what we witnessed was, first, a complete erasure of these women from all celebrations and jubiliations marking the triumph against the authoritarian regime. These July fighters were first erased, then targeted and slut-shamed in cyberspace, and subsequently harassed physically on several occasions. Meanwhile, the perpetrators were eulogised with flower garlands by certain sections of men in the name of chastity and values. Three such perpetrators were rewarded with considerable grandeur. These actions helped to create a new culture of fear, marked by impunity for perpetrators

and renewed humiliation for victims. Although some may attempt to brush off such incidents as disconnected or stray occurrences, even a few such incidents are sufficient to generate a culture of fear and to delimit women’s mobility and freedom. Moreover, the overall lack of security caused by a deteriorating law-and-order situation under the interim government affects women with deeper vulnerabilities. When powerful actors within the state machinery encourage extra-judicial mob violence through pressure groups, the situation worsens for women and girls. Their mobility and security are the first to be curtailed, as misogyny is effectively celebrated through silence from state forces and agencies that are meant to ensure security for all citizens.

In the new year, we should aim to be a developed and inclusive nation, and its future aspirations rely heavily on eliminating gender violence and ensuring women’s full participation in all spheres of life. We must ensure the following. First, economic

empowerment, with a core aspiration of achieving women’s economic independence in order to reduce dependency and vulnerability to abuse. Efforts should focus on improving women’s access to education, formal employment, and other financial opportunities. Secondly, we need to strengthen and enforce laws such as the Domestic Violence (Prevention and Protection) Act and the Child Marriage Restraint Act, and develop a national Sexual Harassment Prevention and Protection Law to safeguard the legal rights of women. In addition, an equal share of income and inheritance should fall under a uniform civil family law, a code for which the women’s movement has long struggled. Thirdly, in the long term, we must shift the patriarchal mindset that perpetuates gender inequality. This requires community-driven initiatives, engaging men and boys as allies, and integrating gender-sensitive education into schools and public awareness campaigns. Last but not least, women’s empowerment

and development require sustained investment from the state to ensure affirmative action for more than 50 per cent of its populace that continues to lag behind. Borrowing from Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain, we cannot think of advancing smoothly when one of our two wheels is broken. Future aspirations must focus on establishing coordinated, robust, and survivor-centred support services, including medical, legal, and psychosocial assistance, with particular emphasis on confidentiality and accessibility.

In essence, while gender violence presents a significant barrier, Bangladesh’s future aspirations must involve a holistic approach that tackles both the symptoms and root causes of inequality in order to foster a safe, inclusive, and thriving society for all its citizens. This requires a substantial shift in socio-cultural norms, strict enforcement of laws, and the active engagement of men and boys in building a safer and more equitable society.

A transition from ‘Ageism’ to ‘Agevism’

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Other Social Security Programmes, such as the Allowance for Freedom Fighters and the Allowance for Widows and Husband Deserted Women, also support many older people. However, among rights scholars, many argue that mandatory retirement laws and policies are one of the active catalysts for deepening the ‘Ageism’ context. While many other countries have passed Anti-Age Discrimination Laws (i.e., Australia), Bangladesh has yet to do so. Besides this, there is still a lack of a specific elderly abuse prevention law in Bangladesh, despite having

its distinctive nature, which requires special attention like women, children or the environment for the common good.

Furthermore, the government integrated ageing issues into other policies such as the Health Population & Nutrition Sector Development Plan (HPNSDP) (2011), Accelerating Growth and Reducing Poverty (2011), the Population Policy (2012), the Social Welfare Policy (2012), and the Sixth Five-Year Plan FY2011-FY2015, as well as the National Health Policy for Older Persons (2008), which prioritises developing the human and physical

resources needed for the healthcare of the ageing population. Furthermore, the Bangladesh Family Care Program (2012) connects government agencies to provide holistic health and social support to the elderly and other vulnerable groups. However, sometimes having special attention for older people in different policies that tag themselves as physically less suitable and vulnerable compared to their other age groups can create a negative image of this age group. Sometimes, these can create confusion between physical and mental ability, and age-related inability, incidentally.

However, policies could incorporate active ageing to promote sustainable well-being.

The UN Independent Expert on older persons observed that Bangladeshi elders often “feel invisible and burdensome,” reflecting deep-rooted ageist attitudes (UN OHCHR, 2022). Older women are particularly disadvantaged due to gender inequality, limited assets, and poor pension coverage (HelpAge International, 2019). Health services also remain age-insensitive — few hospitals have geriatric units, and most rural health centres lack trained personnel. In addition, the social protection net (e.g., the Old-Age Allowance) covers less than half of eligible seniors, with benefits too low to meet living costs (World Bank, 2023).

In the existing context, where ageing has been seen as an essential component of a broader developmental goal, there is a possibility to move beyond traditional target-based approaches and re-ground ageing policy in the context of social progress, gender equity, human rights, and decreasing poverty. In light of this viewpoint, it becomes obvious that ageing is more than just a byproduct of developmental policy, and that, by using the ageing policy as a catalyst, a just and democratic society can be established.

Combating ageism: The policy projections

In harnessing long-rooted and practised ‘Ageism’, Bangladesh should integrate legal reform with cultural and institutional transformation. In line with legal action, it can enact a comprehensive Anti-Age Discrimination Act covering employment, healthcare, and public services, and strengthen enforcement of the Maintenance of Parents Act.

Moreover, to signify the elderly issues, an elderly abuse prevention law integrating a dedicated, speedy justice forum is much needed. As part of institutional reform, it is urgent to establish a National Commission for Older Persons to coordinate policies and monitor the implementation of rights. Moreover, expanding social protection by broadening the Universal Pension Scheme and ensuring timely, adequate allowances for all elderly citizens would greatly facilitate efforts to combat ageism. With regard to health and community support, developing age-friendly hospitals, community-based care, and psychosocial support programmes can make a notable change in the condition of elderly people in Bangladesh. Additionally, cultural change, promoted through education, media, and local initiatives, to foster intergenerational solidarity and counter stereotypes, recognising elders as contributors, not burdens, will add value to the combating ageism movement in Bangladesh.

Regulating ‘Ageism’ in Bangladesh demands more than charity or welfare — it requires recognising older persons as rights-holders, a recognition that the recent elder-rights scholarship calls ‘Agevism’. Like other rights subjects, the elderly group should be a focal point for policy and rights platforms as this group has already met the two vital statuses of political identity and political philosophy of elderly rights to create a novel ‘ism’— ‘Agevism’ like feminism or socialism in global scholarship. By aligning constitutional principles, legal safeguards, and social attitudes with international standards, Bangladesh can move towards a more inclusive, dignified society where ageing is valued rather than termed a socio-economic burden.



FILE PHOTO: STAR

An elderly woman sits in an old-age home, reading the day’s newspaper. Cut off from direct contact with her children, she pours her heart into a letter each month, pinning it to the noticeboard behind her — a quiet, unspoken plea for connection.