

Why are there so few women candidates?

Political parties have failed women and the spirit of July uprising

The number of women contesting the upcoming parliamentary elections starkly exposes the persistent under-representation of women in Bangladesh's politics. Of the 1,981 candidates competing in the polls, only 78 are women. This glaring imbalance reflects the deep-rooted chauvinism and discrimination faced by women with political ambition. Moreover, nearly a third of nominated women candidates are wives, daughters, or relatives of influential men, indicating how difficult it is for women to participate in politics independently and on their own merit.

This reality is particularly troubling in a country where women constitute half the population yet make up less than four percent of electoral candidates. Of the 78 women, only 17 are independents. As an analysis of Election Commission data by *The Daily Star* shows, around 30 parties have not nominated a single woman candidate. Two-thirds of parliamentary seats have no female contenders at all, and women with familial or marital ties to powerful political figures are far more likely to succeed than those without such connections. Thus, women are still not regarded as serious contenders.

The exclusion of women is especially disheartening given their central role in the 2024 uprising, where women mobilised, organised, and took significant risks alongside men. Yet, their participation has not translated into greater political representation. Instead, women have increasingly been pushed out of public and political spaces, both overtly through exclusion and more insidiously by intimidation. Anti-women rhetoric has intensified both online and offline in recent times, sometimes driven by religion-based political groups seeking to silence women's voices. Even the few women who have dared to contest elections have faced coordinated online attacks.

Existing legal frameworks have done little to address the prevailing imbalance. The Representation of the People Order, 1972 requires political parties to reserve at least 33 percent of committee posts for women, including at the central level. Yet, most parties have failed to comply with this provision. Even one of the country's largest and oldest parties, the BNP, has nominated fewer than ten women, while Jamaat-e-Islami has fielded none. Electoral politics in Bangladesh—shaped by money, patronage, and muscle power—systematically disadvantages women as parties, focused solely on winning seats, continue to prioritise male candidates. Women nominees are often expected to rely on the backing of fathers, husbands, or brothers.

Even the proposal by the Women's Affairs Reform Commission to increase the number of reserved seats to 100 with direct elections was not accepted by political parties. With no women representatives included in the July Charter consensus discussions, it was unsurprising that reserved seats were kept at only 50, with no provision for direct elections.

If we are serious about democratic reform, women's presence in parliament and political leadership must be substantially increased. A democracy cannot claim legitimacy when half its population remains so poorly represented. Political parties must move beyond tokenism and actively invest in developing women leaders, ensuring they have equal opportunities to compete, win, and shape the country's future.

The key is in proper execution of the law

New ordinances on women, children must not falter at implementation

We welcome the government's recent approval of two draft ordinances aimed at preventing violence against women (VAW) in homes, public spaces, and institutions, as well as ensuring justice for survivors. The Workplace and Educational Institutions Sexual Harassment Prevention Ordinance, 2026 defines sexual harassment broadly to include all forms of unwanted and degrading physical, verbal, and non-verbal conduct. Sexual harassment perpetrated through social media, email, messaging platforms, and other digital technologies has also been brought under the purview of the ordinance. Moreover, workplaces and educational institutions will be required to set up an Internal Complaint Committee (ICC) to receive and investigate complaints, ensure the complainant's safety during inquiries, and recommend appropriate disciplinary action. Penalties range from formal reprimand and demotion to termination of employment (or expulsion in the case of educational institutions).

Meanwhile, the Domestic Violence Prevention Ordinance, 2026—which will replace the Domestic Violence (Prevention and Protection) Act, 2010—aims to protect women and children from domestic abuse, ensure speedy trials, and establish survivor-centric remedies. Commendably, the ordinance broadens the scopes of the definitions of domestic violence including physical and psychological abuse, sexual abuse, as well as economic abuse.

While these new ordinances provide a stronger legal foundation for addressing gender-based violence and violence against children, their effectiveness will ultimately depend on how well they are implemented. Past experience in this regard is not reassuring. It is worth recalling that enforcement of the High Court's 2009 guidelines on sexual harassment prevention was largely disappointing, particularly as no comprehensive law was enacted on the basis of those directives even 15 years later. Where committees were formed under the guidelines, they were often hastily constituted, incomplete, or ineffective in delivering justice. We, therefore, hope that the requirement to form ICCs under the new ordinance will be taken seriously and implemented in both letter and spirit, without delay.

The historical and ongoing challenges of enforcing preventive laws against sexual harassment and domestic violence must be carefully considered by all stakeholders tasked with implementing these ordinances. While the explicit recognition of online abuse is welcome, it also necessitates stronger coordination between the government and digital platforms, many of which fail to cooperate well with countries outside the Global North, despite having large user bases in the Global South.

Too often, it is not the absence of laws but the failure to apply them properly that allows violence against women and children to persist with impunity. The government and relevant institutions, both private and public, must acknowledge this reality and work proactively to address it. Most importantly, once parliament resumes after the upcoming election, the next elected government must ensure that these ordinances are enacted into full-fledged laws without delay.

EDITORIAL

Voters must hold politicians to task over health, education



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On January 25, a 20-year-old female patient suffering from kidney and heart complications jumped to her death from the eighth floor of Dhaka Medical College Hospital. The deceased, mother to a four-month-old baby, had been undergoing treatment intermittently for several months, but her family could no longer afford to continue it. Their resources were exhausted.

This incident received little media attention. But it should have shaken us because it is not an isolated tragedy, nor is it merely a personal story of despair. It is a clear and devastating signal of the deep insecurity within which the majority of people in Bangladesh are forced to live.

Across the country, countless families have been ruined while trying to pay medical bills. Many cannot afford treatment at all. In Bangladesh, illness does not only attack the body; it dismantles entire households. People sell off land, jewellery, livestock, and dignity. And often, even that is not enough.

At first glance, the healthcare sector appears to be flourishing. New private hospitals and clinics are emerging everywhere. They are modern, well-equipped, and prohibitively expensive. However, this surface-level brightness hides a darker reality. Access to healthcare, recognised as a fundamental right and enshrined in our constitution since 1972, has steadily moved further out of reach for ordinary people.

Healthcare has become expensive because it has been systematically commercialised. Successive governments, with policy support from institutions such as the World Bank, have promoted privatisation and market-driven reforms. As a result, healthcare is no longer treated as a public service but as a profitable business sector. The state has retreated, and citizens have been left to fend for themselves.

The interim government has not initiated any meaningful departure from this trajectory. The latest budget reflects the same pattern as previous governments: minimal allocations for health and education, which is among the lowest not only in South Asia, but globally. Even within these limited allocations, irregularities persist. There is no visible policy shift that recognises healthcare and education as fundamental rights deserving structural reform.

This absence of recognition is glaring, particularly given the promises made in the name of building a discrimination-free Bangladesh. Those commitments find no reflection in budgetary priorities.

The incident cited above and others like it are not random acts of desperation. They are the outcomes of continued systemic failures.

As the country moves towards another national election, political

parties are making a wide range of promises. Yet, among these, what is conspicuously absent is a clear and firm commitment to making the state fully responsible for ensuring healthcare for all.

This silence must be challenged. All political parties should clearly declare that healthcare is a fundamental right, a public good and that the state must bear responsibility for ensuring universal access. This requires a sustained increase in budgetary allocation, as well as the strengthening of public institutions, including government hospitals, clinics, and community health centres.

One crucial and often overlooked step towards strengthening public healthcare is accountability at the highest level. There must be a political

universities, private institutions dominate the landscape. There is no uniform education standard. Instead, inequality has deepened.

Those with money can purchase better-quality education. Those without are confined to a deteriorating public system. Public schools, especially those in rural areas, are often in a state of neglect, struggling with poor infrastructure and limited resources. This has created a sharp divide between public and private education. However, even within the private sector, a wide spectrum of quality can be observed.

Multiple layers of inequality have emerged from the various streams of education—religious versus secular education, Bangla medium versus English medium, Bangla version versus English version and so on. Education, instead of reducing inequality, now actively reproduces it.

The interim government has not attempted to reverse this trend of increasing inequality in education. On the contrary, a new and dangerous development has taken hold within educational institutions. Teachers, from primary schools to universities,

were given no reasonable explanation and no opportunity to defend themselves. Their dismissal was not based on professional misconduct but on their independent views on certain ideologies or beliefs. It was carried out in response to mob pressure, using religion as a tool of intimidation. The teachers had no minimum guarantee of job security. Academic freedom was discarded without hesitation.

The ability to ask questions lies at the heart of education. It is meant to cultivate analytical and critical thinking, to bring everything under scrutiny and open new avenues of knowledge. What we are witnessing now is a direct assault on that foundation. It is deeply alarming.

As elections approach and political rhetoric intensifies, citizens must pay attention and note which parties genuinely recognise public education and public healthcare as fundamental rights. Those who do not must be questioned. Those who claim they do must be pressed for clear roadmaps. How will they bring these sectors back under public control and ensure universal access?

Political parties must also be held



VISUAL: SALMAN SAKIB SHAHRYAR

commitment that the president, prime minister, ministers, bureaucrats, and all government officials will receive treatment in public hospitals. Such a commitment, or binding requirement, would fundamentally alter the system.

If those in power were required to rely on public hospitals, their own urgency would drive institutional reform. Capacity would improve, funding would increase, and long-overdue overhauls would finally receive attention. At present, the opposite happens. Those in power travel abroad for treatment at public expense. Those with money follow suit. And because the powerful do not depend on the domestic system, there is little incentive to fix it.

The education sector mirrors this crisis.

Here too, privatisation and commercialisation have expanded rapidly. From primary schools to

are increasingly living in fear. They are uncertain whether they can teach freely, whether they can speak openly in classrooms, or whether they can properly discuss history, social science, or philosophy.

An organised practice of suppressing independent opinion through mob violence has emerged, with no sustained action by the state to counter it. Across schools, colleges, and universities, incidents have occurred where teachers have been threatened, forcibly removed, or barred from entering campuses. Groups demand that teachers be answerable for what they teach, questioning why certain topics were discussed and why certain ideas were introduced.

The most recent incident in this regard took place at the University of Asia Pacific, where two teachers were dismissed without due process. They

accountable for the threats facing freedom of opinion and academic independence. We must ask who is responsible for creating this climate of fear within academia. It is also crucial to note which parties oppose this trend and how vocal they are in demanding change.

Public scrutiny is essential. Political actors must be brought under public surveillance and accountability so that whoever comes to power cannot ignore these crises.

A society where people die because they cannot afford treatment, and where teachers are threatened for teaching, is not sustainable. Bangladesh must move towards a future where every citizen can access education and healthcare without fear or discrimination, and where dignity is not a privilege, but a right.

Time to seal off these wells of death



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As I began writing this, a community in Raozan, Chattogram, was desperately trying to rescue a boy named Misbah, trapped in the depths of an abandoned tube-well pit. Villagers, later joined by the fire service, mounted a frantic search to pull him out. They hoped that little Misbah would find his way back to his mother's arms. He did not. As a newspaper headline later read: 'Body of 3-year-old recovered 4 hours after falling into pit.' By then, of course, he was dead. I sat in silence after reading the news, overwhelmed by profound sadness, asking myself: How irresponsible can the authorities be?

Not long ago, on December 10, two-year-old Sajid fell into an abandoned 30-foot-deep tube-well pit in Tanore, Rajshahi. After 32 agonising hours of searching, rescuers could only retrieve his lifeless body. The nation also wept over that heartbreaking incident. The government was stirred into action, giving assurances that measures would be taken to prevent such incidents from

happening again. But barely six weeks later, another identical tragedy unfolded in a different unattended deep well shaft.

One may also recall the story of four-year-old Jihad in this connection. In 2014, the boy fell into a disused tube well belonging to WASA in Shahjahanpur, Dhaka. About 23 hours after his fall, rescuers brought out his lifeless body. The incident created such an uproar that it seemed the authorities would finally take responsibility and implement necessary safety measures.

They did not. One after another, similar incidents continue to occur, whether in abandoned or unsecured sewer lines or in forsaken tube wells.

I have spent my entire career in water supply and sanitation, working for a UN agency focused on children. And I have consistently raised alarms about the dangers of both abandoned and open wells. Newspapers published articles aimed at raising awareness and influencing policy directions. Yet there has been no concerted

national initiative to address the decommissioning of non-functional tube wells. The fundamental understanding that defunct and abandoned tube wells should be properly decommissioned remains absent from official policy.

It is not just child deaths that result from abandoned wells. These neglected structures are causing damage to our precious groundwater aquifers. Many tube wells are installed every year by both government and private entities, and many more become dysfunctional. These wells act as direct conduits, allowing contaminated, bacteria-laden surface water to seep down and pollute invaluable groundwater reserves. So, just as installing a tube well is important for a community, decommissioning it with equal seriousness is also critical.

Beyond tube wells, another death trap for children in rural areas is the unprotected, wide-mouthed *pat kua* (traditional wells). These wells, 20 to 40 feet deep, also claim lives. But despite repeated tragedies, the authorities have failed to take corrective action. Through abandoned tube wells and open sewer lines, they are effectively allowing preventable deaths and injuries to occur, while simultaneously degrading the environment and endangering our water table.

We must reverse this trend. It is imperative that the government

undertake a comprehensive national survey to identify all abandoned water and sanitation installations and systematically decommission them. Clear protocols must be established for proper decommissioning, including filling, capping, and monitoring these structures. A dedicated unit or task force could be created within the relevant ministry to ensure this. The government should also engage communities and NGOs with experience in water and sanitation management. Public reporting mechanisms should also be established, allowing citizens to alert authorities to hazardous wells. Additionally, policies should mandate that all newly installed tube wells are registered, tracked, and monitored over their lifetime, with funds earmarked for eventual decommissioning.

The importance of raising awareness and teaching basic safety practices to children and families is also crucial. Despite what it may seem to the families struck by such tragedies, these are not unpredictable "acts of God." They are acts of criminal negligence—a direct result of institutional apathy and lack of accountability. The tears shed for Sajid and Jihad have evidently evaporated without leaving a trace of meaningful action. Now, we mourn Misbah. The question is, how many more little children must we lose before the authorities finally seal these gaping holes of death on our land?