

# BAIKKA BEEL'S SILENT COLLAPSE

## Declared protected, left defenceless

MINTU DESHWARA

Baikka Beel, a wetland now facing a deepening crisis of protection, was officially closed to public access a year ago. On paper, the site enjoys sanctuary status. On the ground, however, the reality tells a very different story. Picnicking, birdwatching, bird hunting, fishing, and indiscriminate littering continue openly inside the protected area, with little evidence of effective monitoring or enforcement.

Local residents describe Baikka Beel as a wetland of roughly 100 hectares, situated east of Hail Haor in Srimangal Upazila of Moulvibazar district. Each year, migratory birds arrive from their wintering grounds, usually towards the end of the monsoon and before the onset of winter, and remain until late March. Over time, some species have even taken up permanent residence in the beel. Yet this ecological richness is steadily eroding. Nearly one-third of the wetland has already been lost to siltation, while poaching has caused a sharp and sustained decline in migratory bird populations.

Experts note that Baikka Beel was declared a bird sanctuary in 2003, covering an area of 100 hectares. In the years immediately following this declaration, bird numbers showed a noticeable increase. That initial success,



Despite a complete ban, fishing continues openly inside the Baikka Beel sanctuary.

PHOTOS: MINTU DESHWARA

constant human disturbance, and increasingly adverse environmental conditions are forcing migratory birds to abandon the area altogether.

ASM Saleh Sohel, Moulvibazar coordinator of Bangladesh Poribesh Andolan (BAPA), said that although laws exist to prevent bird hunting, enforcement remains weak. The forest department, he noted, frequently cites shortages of manpower, severely limiting its capacity to act. A lack of public awareness has compounded the problem, while deforestation and excessive human control over haors and beels continue to deepen food and habitat crises for wildlife. "If we are not aware now," he warned, "the future will not forgive us."

Baikka Beel has also been designated a fish sanctuary, yet fish theft has become rampant. In an effort to safeguard the sanctuary, the government formed the Barangina Resource Management

Committee, tasked with conserving the biodiversity of Baikka Beel as a permanent fish sanctuary. Despite these institutional measures, the absence of robust enforcement and sustained public awareness campaigns has left the wetland's future deeply uncertain.

Locals say that in a sanctuary of this size, fish should be easily visible. Instead, fish stocks have declined sharply, further reducing bird presence. Night-time fishing continues unchecked, inflicting lasting damage on the beel's broader biodiversity.

Tanvir Ahmed, a guard at Baikka Beel, said groups of 15 to 20 people are frequently seen entering the beel to steal fish, often carrying weapons. When guards try to intervene, clashes are common.

Bajlu Mia, general secretary of the Baikka Beel Barangina Resource Management Committee, said that only four guards are currently responsible for protecting the vast wetland, which spans

roughly 100 acres.

Following a visit by Farida Akhtar, adviser to the Ministry of Fisheries and Livestock, on February 25 last year, public access to Baikka Beel was officially restricted in order to protect fish and birds, and picnics were banned. Locals, however, say the directive has not been effectively enforced.

Srimangal Upazila Fisheries Senior Officer Joy Banik said raids are conducted at different times to curb illegal fishing and that the administration will continue to provide maximum support.

Nurul Muhaimin Milton, general secretary of the Moulvibazar Environmental Journalists' Association, said birds captured in remote haors and beels are often sold secretly. Many villagers, he added, remain unaware that bird hunting is illegal, making stronger law enforcement, sustained public awareness campaigns, and regular raids essential.

Under the Bangladesh Wildlife (Conservation and Security) Act 2012, killing, capturing, selling, buying, or keeping wild birds is punishable by up to one year's imprisonment, a fine, or

both, with harsher penalties for repeat offences. Yet, Milton observed, the law remains weakly implemented.

Abul Kalam, Sylhet Divisional Forest Officer of the Wildlife Management and Nature Conservation Department, said regular raids are carried out in markets, during which birds are rescued and released. "We respond quickly when we receive information, and raids are conducted across the region. However, due to manpower shortages, it is not possible to completely stop hunting," he said.

Dr Mohammad Abdul Aziz, Professor of Zoology at Jahangirnagar University, pointed to a significant coordination gap between the Fisheries Department and the Forest Department, which has undermined conservation efforts. He noted that development planning is often driven by economic priorities, with ecological concerns pushed aside. As a result, issues relating to birds and forests are frequently excluded from broader development strategies.

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A notice has been issued prohibiting tourist entry.

however, proved short-lived. Persistent poaching and unregulated landfilling have repeatedly disrupted migratory patterns. An analysis of bird censuses conducted since 2008 reveals a clear and worrying decline in the average number of species recorded at the site.

Environmental activists warn that poaching is intensifying, while mounting human pressure on the haor ecosystem is accelerating biodiversity loss. Habitat degradation, food scarcity,



# When infrastructure fails women

## The reality of shared toilets in informal settlements

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Every year, during the month of October, UN-Habitat encourages us to engage in Urban October—a time for reflection and conversation about the challenges and opportunities created by the rapid pace of change in our cities and towns. Bangladesh has showcased exceptional improvements in infrastructural development with the help of numerous international partners and donors—but gaps persist in the equitable distribution of benefits from these developments.

Sitting in a barely lit room, I interviewed a young girl. She was about sixteen years old and lived in Kallyanpur Pora Bosti within that one tiny room with her father, mother, and younger sister. She spoke with great enthusiasm while recounting her experience at school and the dreams she holds for the future—but when we approached the topic of menstrual hygiene, she became uneasy. When asked why she did not use disposable sanitary napkins, despite knowing their benefits, her answer was simple: "Where do you expect me to dispose of them? I share this bedroom with my father... Am I supposed to change my pad in front of him?"

Just a couple of feet away from the room was a row of four toilets (without access to running water) assigned to almost 60 households within that block. The four toilets were allocated to 10–12 families each, with each family having between three and five members. She explained that for a woman, it was almost impossible to find enough time to change disposable pads in those toilets, as there was always someone waiting. Rather than enduring a constant barrage of knocks and remarks from outside, she felt it was



VISUAL: ALIZA RAHMAN

best to use reusable cloth pads, which she could change in the shower area.

This is a common story for many girls in informal settlements, who hide reusable cloth pads behind doors, hoping they will dry out in the dark room in time for reuse. Some remain inside their dwellings, deciding not to go to school and withdrawing from public spaces and male family members who share the same living area. They do not feel safe using shared toilets to manage menstrual hygiene—facilities that often lack running water and adequate privacy.

Sanitation plays a significant role in quality of life, individual health, and overall public health in such a densely populated country as ours. Improved sanitation facilities are now found in 59% of all households—an impressive 15% increase from 2017–18. While this progress reflects the dedication of development agencies, a closer look reveals a pro-rich pattern, suggesting that higher

socio-economic groups, due to increased disposable income, are more likely to access improved sanitation.

### SHARED SANITATION FACILITIES

Even in the most developed city, such as Dhaka, many people live in conditions that make it difficult to maintain a healthy and safe hygiene routine. Around 40.2% of Dhaka's population—almost four million people—live in urban informal settlements characterised by inadequate sanitation, overcrowding, and poor housing. Most households in these settlements are recognised as having unimproved sanitation, as the JMP defines "improved" facilities as those not shared with another household. Yet overcrowding often means that five to ten families share a single toilet, resulting in long waits and conflicts during peak hours.

### THE HEALTH TOLL: A CASCADE OF CONSEQUENCES

The health consequences of inadequate

sanitation are well documented. Living in informal settlements increases the risk of waterborne diseases, reproductive tract infections, and parasitic infestations. Women are three times more likely than men to develop these conditions, according to a 2025 study across two urban municipalities. Evidence also links WASH insecurity with mental health disorders among women, particularly depression and anxiety.

Health impacts extend beyond illness. Women bear the burden of caring for sick family members, spending prolonged periods in close contact with those requiring care. This responsibility disproportionately falls on women, alongside managing households.

### BARRIERS BEYOND INFRASTRUCTURE:



PHOTO: RASHED SHUNON

A makeshift latrine built from crumpled corrugated tin sheets, highlighting the harsh sanitation realities of informal settlements.

### CULTURE, ECONOMICS, AND EXCLUSION

Entrenched gender roles assign WASH-related burdens to women while excluding them from decision-making on facility design and management. Lack of privacy in shared toilets forces unsafe menstrual hygiene practices, despite women's awareness of healthier alternatives. Many wear pads

for longer than recommended or rely on reusable pads to avoid disposal. Regardless of choice, lack of privacy often leads to reusing inadequately sanitised cloth pads, increasing health risks.

During morning routines, while men queue to leave for work, women often avoid toilets to escape rude remarks. Even when they gain access, constant knocking makes proper hygiene difficult. From a gendered perspective, shared toilets are often unhygienic, poorly lit, and far from home, exposing women to harassment or assault, particularly at night. To avoid these risks, many restrict food and water intake, leading to dehydration and further health complications. The lack of safe, private, and accessible sanitation is not merely inconvenient—it directly threatens women's safety and dignity.

The struggle for safe and dignified sanitation in Bangladesh's informal settlements is not only an infrastructural issue, but one of gender equity, public health, and basic human rights. While the nation celebrates progress in sanitation coverage, gains remain uneven, leaving women and girls to bear a disproportionate burden. Addressing these challenges requires more than technical fixes; it demands a holistic approach that tackles cultural taboos, empowers women in decision-making, and ensures equitable access to dignified WASH facilities. Until then, the safety, dignity, and well-being of millions of women and girls remain overlooked in Bangladesh's development legacy.

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