DHAKA SUNDAY MARCH 8, 2026, FALGUN 23, 1432 BS • starbusiness@thedailystar.net

Star BUSINESS

Bangladesh educates its women, but leaves many without jobs

MD ASADUZ ZAMAN

Bangladesh has made striking gains in educating its women. Universities and colleges now turn out more female graduates than ever before, nearly half of all students. But the labour market has failed to accommodate them, with female graduates nearly twice as likely to be unemployed as their male peers.

According to government data, females accounted for 47 percent of all public university graduates in 2023, up from just 14 percent in 1973.

BY THE NUMBERS (As of 2024)

JOBLESS RATES AMONG GRADUATES
Female: 20.39%
Male: 11.31%
Overall: 13.54%

YOUTH UNEMPLOYMENT RATE AGED 15-29
Female: 34% | **Male:** 26%

Total unemployed graduates: nearly 9 lakh

However, the 2024 Labour Force Survey (LFS) by the Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics show that the unemployment rate among female graduates stood at 20.39 percent, compared with 11.31 percent for their male counterparts.

The disparity is even sharper among the young. Among those aged 15 to 29, unemployment hits 34 percent for women, against 26 percent for men.

As Bangladesh observes International Women's Day today under the theme "Leading the Change: Women Shaping a Sustainable Future," the gap between aspiration and opportunity remains glaring.

Analysts point to a lack of suitable job openings, inhospitable work environments, and entrenched social attitudes as the main culprits behind unemployment among women with higher education.

"Despite narrowing gender gaps in education, the labour market continues to present a starkly different reality for women," says Sayema Haque Bidisha, a professor of economics at the University of Dhaka.

She said even the official figures may

READ MORE ON B3

Bank deposit growth hits five-year high in 2025

STAR BUSINESS REPORT

Deposit growth in banks hit a five-year high at the end of December 2025 -- owing to a gradual recovery in confidence among savers.

Banks in the country recorded Tk 21 lakh crore in savings at the end of last year, which was 11.51 percent higher year-on-year, according to quarterly statistics of scheduled banks published by the Bangladesh Bank (BB).

With this growth, deposits in 61 banks crossed the Tk 20 lakh crore mark, the highest so far.

"It appears that people's confidence in banks is gradually being restored," said Md Mahiul Islam, deputy managing director at BRAC Bank.

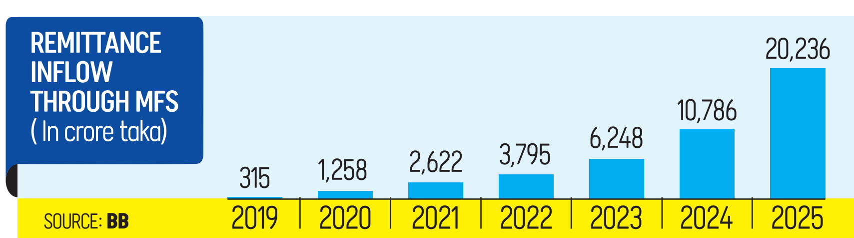
But not all banks registered an increased flow of savings. The deposit surge is limited to some seven to eight banks, he said.

The BB data showed that private banks, including Islamic banks, accounted for 69.52 percent of the total deposits, followed by state banks and foreign banks.

In 2024, the growth of deposits in the banking sector slowed due to a confidence crisis centring on some banks that suffered from high loan irregularities and faced problems returning money to savers on demand, even though most banks offered high interest on savings.

READ MORE ON B3

MFS emerges as fast-growing remittance channel



SOHEL PARVEZ

Mobile financial services (MFS) are increasingly becoming a major channel for remittances sent by millions of Bangladeshis working abroad.

Remitters sent Tk 20,236 crore through MFS, excluding Nagad, in 2025, almost double the amount -- Tk 10,786 crore -- they sent home a year ago.

Bangladesh Bank (BB) data shows that MFS accounted for a small but growing portion of remittances transferred by Bangladeshis abroad. Roughly 90 percent of them work in the Middle East, especially in Saudi Arabia.

This situation would have been inconceivable seven years ago. In 2019, migrant workers sent $18.3 billion or more than Tk 150,000 crore in remittances, out of which only Tk 315 crore came through MFS. Since then, remittances sent through MFS have grown 64 times, thanks to efforts by MFS providers, mainly bKash.

The country's largest MFS provider has been a pioneer in delivering remittances to the doorsteps of migrant workers' families. In 2025, these workers sent home $33 billion, or over Tk 400,000 crore, in remittances.

READ MORE ON B2

Rising US fuel prices risk sparking domestic wildfire for Trump

AFP, *Washington*

Sean Robinson, a 54-year-old schoolteacher in the US capital Washington, did not realize how high gas prices had gotten until he arrived at the pump on Friday.

"That is a sizeable jump," he told AFP, pointing to a neon sign showing $3.27 for a gallon of regular gasoline.

Robinson is among US consumers feeling the sting of a cost surge sparked by the US-Israel war on Iran, which sent oil prices soaring as Tehran effectively blocked the Strait of Hormuz after being attacked.

But the price hike comes at a politically sensitive time for President Donald Trump as midterm elections approach, hitting voters hard.

Expensive gasoline could also prompt the independent central bank to put the brakes on the world's largest economy as it battles stubborn inflation.

Since last week, US average domestic fuel prices have risen 11 percent, according to the AAA's fuel price gauge.

It is the kind of move that Robinson said will have him cutting down on all but the essentials.

"It just determines what I'm going to do on a day-to-day basis," he said. "Pretty much start thinking about (watching) Netflix, staying in the house instead of burning gas."

Others at the gas station agreed.

"It impacts all areas of life," said Toloria Washington, 39. "We are in a state of survival mode."

Washington, who works in finance, said fuel expenses are non-negotiable for her. With prices rising at the pump, she had to make cuts elsewhere.

That, she said, is a problem for people already battered by years of high prices post-pandemic. "That's the key thing, it's tapping into everybody's basics," she added. "It's the basics. Daily survival of food, water, housing."

US inflation hit a peak of 9.1 percent during the pandemic. While it has cooled since then, analysts warn of risks of another pick-up.

"Inflation showed signs of accelerating prior to the jump in energy prices," said KPMG chief economist Diane Swonk.

"That has left consumers in a sour mood," she added.

Swonk warned that rising fuel prices added "insult to injury" for low-income Americans, who are already seeing higher healthcare costs and a tightening of welfare benefits under Trump.

Trump, who has bragged about oil prices falling during his term, sought to address the political fallout on Friday, telling CNN he expected prices to come down quickly.

His Republican party holds only a slim majority in both the House and Senate.

With midterm elections due in November, he will be hoping that voters do not let tightening household budgets weaken his political position.

Trump could see further complications if inflation from gasoline price hikes pushes the Fed to respond by keeping interest rates at a higher level.

The central bank has a dual mandate of maintaining stable prices and maximum employment, but has one main tool to do so -- adjusting interest rates.

Raising them generally cools economic activity and reduces inflation while lowering them can spur activity, boosting the weakening employment market.

The prospect of more inflation due to oil prices raises the specter of what some analysts call a nightmare scenario.

"This could not come at a worse time for the Federal Reserve," said KPMG's Swonk. "It now has a dueling mandate with the risk that inflation not only lingers but accelerates."

Fed policymakers remain cautious.

Addressing higher domestic energy prices on Friday, Federal Reserve governor Christopher Waller told Bloomberg TV he considered them "unlikely to cause sustained inflation." But this is scant consolation for many Americans hit by even a temporary bout of price increases.

The photo shows a sign displaying prices for gasoline at a station in Chicago, Illinois on March 2. US consumers are feeling the sting of a cost surge sparked by the US-Israel war on Iran, which sent oil prices soaring. PHOTO: AFP

US states sue to challenge Trump's new 10% tariff

AFP, *Washington*

A group of US states said Thursday that they had filed a lawsuit against President Donald Trump's new tariffs on imports, imposed after the Supreme Court struck down his global duties last month.

In their lawsuit, attorneys general from New York, California, Oregon and other states argued that Trump had "once again exercised tariff authority that he does not have" in rolling out a 10-percent levy after his earlier duties were ruled illegal.

"Because these tariffs are unlawful, this court should declare that they are not in force" and order that refunds be made, the group of 24 states said in its filing to the US Court of International Trade.

Trump's new tariffs last only for 150 days, unless they are extended by Congress, but he has already threatened to raise the rate to 15 percent and his administration is pursuing more lasting action.

For now, the states charged that Section 122 of the Trade Act of 1974 did not authorize Trump's "immense and ever-changing" duties.

For one, the law was designed to allow limited tariffs to address issues like a significant "balance of payments" deficit, the group said -- a situation the group says the United States is not facing.

The law also requires that new tariffs should not be applied discriminatorily, something the filing says Trump is doing.

"The new tariffs exempt many goods from Canada, Mexico, Costa Rica, the Dominican Republic, El Salvador, Guatemala, Honduras, and Nicaragua," New York Attorney General Letitia James's office said in a statement.

"They also include 84 pages of specific product exceptions," the statement said.

"Once again, President Trump is ignoring the law and the Constitution to effectively raise taxes on consumers and small businesses," James said.

California Attorney General Rob Bonta said in a separate statement that the state had "challenged the illegal imposition of tariffs time and time again because this question matters enormously for Californians who are already struggling with rising costs."

The Supreme Court's ruling does not affect Trump's sector-specific tariffs, but it has opened the door to a rush for refunds as importers try to get back lost revenues.

Lubna Yasmin, chief consultant of Meena IVF & Fertility Care Limited, and Shaila Abedin, senior executive vice-president and head of liability of Prime Bank PLC, pose for a photograph after signing the agreement at Prime Aspire in Dhaka recently. PHOTO: PRIME BANK

Prime Bank clients to enjoy healthcare benefits at Meena IVF

STAR BUSINESS DESK

Prime Bank PLC has signed a strategic agreement with Meena IVF & Fertility Care Limited to offer healthcare benefits to its customers and employees.

Shaila Abedin, senior executive vice-president and head of liability of Prime Bank PLC, and Lubna Yasmin, chief consultant of Meena IVF & Fertility Care Limited, signed the agreement at Prime Aspire in Dhaka recently, according to a press release.

Under the partnership, Prime Bank Neera customers and employees will enjoy attractive discounts on a wide range of services provided by Meena IVF & Fertility Care Limited, one of the country's leading fertility and reproductive healthcare providers.

The collaboration reflects Prime Bank's continued commitment to delivering meaningful privileges and comprehensive lifestyle benefits to its customers and employees while reinforcing its dedication to supporting quality healthcare services in Bangladesh, the release added.

Hossain Mohammad Zakaria, head of customer proposition of the bank, and Mehmud Hasan Joy, senior manager of operations at the healthcare provider, along with other senior officials from both organisations, were also present.

MFS emerges

FROM PAGE B1

bKash alone handled Tk 20,000 crore in remittances last year. While the growth was substantial, the amount of remittance sent using MFS was only 5 percent of the total.

Industry stakeholders said MFS operators do not directly collect remittances from Bangladeshi migrants working abroad. Migrant workers themselves decide whether they want to send money to MFS accounts or take the more traditional route of sending remittances through bank accounts.

MFS is gaining popularity fast as it is more convenient and offers instant delivery to remote, rural areas. Another perk is that money can be sent to multiple MFS accounts instead of just one bank account, so remitters can transfer funds to a number of people without any hassle.

In the case of MFS, the ticket size is small. When one has to send a large amount of money, bank accounts are preferred. Additionally, there is a 2.5 percent government incentive on remittances. If a migrant worker sends Tk 1,000 as remittance, the recipient will receive Tk 1,025.

Promotional campaigns by MFS providers in Bangladesh's migrant belts abroad have supported the growth.

Ali Ahmmed, chief commercial officer of bKash, said that currently, expatriates can send remittances directly to their loved ones' bKash accounts through 135 international money transfer operators (MTOs) from over 170 countries, which get settled at 27 commercial banks in Bangladesh.

"This commitment to delivery has made bKash a preferred platform, resulting in the highest inward remittance flows among MFS channels in 2025," he said.

"This momentum has also inspired more global money transfer companies to collaborate with us, offering exclusive Eid incentives for expatriates to further encourage the use of formal banking channels."

A total of 41 lakh bKash accounts received these remittances, almost double that of the previous year.

While the BB data does not account for remittances sent through Nagad, Muhammad Zahidul Islam, head of Media and Communication of the platform, said they witnessed "tremendous growth" recently.

"Overall, remittance growth at Nagad exceeded 28 percent last year compared to the previous year, and the numbers continue to rise steadily," he said.

Nagad has modernised the remittance receiving process, Islam noted, which enabled Bangladeshi expatriates to send their hard-earned money to their loved ones from anywhere in the world.

"Through our campaigns, we are also actively promoting remittances via legal channels, and these initiatives are delivering positive results, as reflected in the growing figures," he added.

Blanket accusations against businesses improper: Fahmida Khatun

STAR BUSINESS REPORT

Businesses involved in wrongdoing must be brought under the law, but genuine entrepreneurs should be allowed to run their operations without obstruction, said Fahmida Khatun, executive director of the Centre for Policy Dialogue (CPD).

"Most businesspeople want to contribute to the country's development, employment generation and investment," she said, adding that blanket accusations against them are not appropriate.

The economist made the remarks yesterday while speaking as the chief guest at a shadow parliament debate competition organised by Debate for Democracy at the Bangladesh Film Development Corporation (FDC) in Dhaka.

She said that prolonged geopolitical tensions in the Middle East could put fresh pressure on the economy.

"If the geopolitical tensions in the Middle East persist, the economy will face additional strain," Fahmida said, adding that higher fuel prices, job losses and supply chain disruptions could worsen the situation.

Against this backdrop, she emphasised maintaining a supportive climate for entrepreneurs so that economic activity continues without disruption.

The CPD executive director also highlighted the importance of restoring stability in the banking sector, describing it as the "guardian of people's money and the centre of the economy."

She also said politicisation of the central bank in the past contributed to a rise in wilful loan defaults.

Hasan Ahmed Chowdhury Kiron, chairman of Debate for Democracy, presided over the event.

In his remarks, he said the new government has inherited a fragile economy and that rebuilding confidence among businesses is vital for recovery.

He also called for the withdrawal of cases filed to harass businesspeople, arguing that legal complications and restrictions have discouraged investment and disrupted business activity.

The debate was held on the motion: "The new government will meet public expectations through achieving economic stability."

A team from Primeasia University won the competition, defeating Dhaka International University in the final round.

Gold price rises

REUTERS

Gold rose on Friday after softer US payrolls data kept hopes of a Federal Reserve rate cut alive, but remained on track for its first weekly decline in five weeks as a stronger dollar kept gains in check.

Spot gold was up 1.4 percent at $5,149.14 per ounce as of 01:31 p.m. ET (1831 GMT), but was down 2.4 percent this week. US gold futures for April delivery settled 1.6 percent higher at $5,158.70.

"An alarmingly weak payrolls report that saw heavy private sector job losses along with higher wages whispers stagflation; let's see if this is enough to help gold recover from what has been a disappointing week," said Tai Wong, an independent metals trader.

Data showed that nonfarm payrolls decreased by 92,000 jobs last month, compared with economists' expectations for a 59,000 gain, while the unemployment rate rose to 4.4 percent.

Oil may top $100 if Hormuz flows don't recover: Goldman Sachs

REUTERS

Goldman Sachs said oil prices are likely to exceed $100 per barrel next week if no signs of a solution emerge to the severe disruption in flows through the Strait of Hormuz, warning that upside risks to its base-case forecast are rapidly growing further.

The bank said it plans to revisit its oil price forecast soon if it does not see evidence supporting its assumption of a gradual normalization in Strait of Hormuz flows over the next few days.

Its current base-case Brent forecast is in the $80s for March and the high $70s for the second quarter.

"We now also think it's likely that oil prices, especially for refined products, would exceed the 2008 and 2022 peaks, if Strait of Hormuz flows were to remain depressed throughout March," it added.

Crude oil was set on Friday for its strongest weekly gain since the extreme volatility of the COVID-19 pandemic in spring of 2020, as conflict in the Middle East kept shipping and energy exports through the vital Strait of Hormuz halted.

Goldman Sachs currently estimates that average daily flows through the Strait of Hormuz are down 90 percent.

Bangladesh educates its women

WHY ARE WOMEN'S UNEMPLOYMENT RATES HIGHER?

- Mismatch between education and available jobs
- Narrower job options due to social and structural barriers
- Workplace safety, commuting, and housing concerns
- Rigid working hours and lack of flexible jobs
- Lack of childcare and daycare facilities
- Career breaks due to marriage and motherhood
- Gender bias in hiring and promotion
- Concentration of women in a few sectors
- Higher unemployment among educated urban women

FROM PAGE B1

understate the problem, as unemployment is counted based on just one hour of work in the previous week. Labour market trends consistently show that unemployment among women remains higher than among men.

"One key reason is the mismatch between the types of jobs available and the expectations of highly educated job seekers," Prof Bidisha added.

Individuals with higher degrees usually look for jobs that match their educational qualifications. But the number of such jobs is limited, particularly for women, she pointed out. The range of job options available to women is often narrower because of social and structural constraints.

"Many women have to consider safety, commuting, housing, and rigid working hours when looking for employment," she said. "These factors naturally limit the range of jobs they are able or willing to pursue."

She also noted that progress in women's education has yet to translate into equal representation in senior roles.

"Only about 6.2 percent of managerial positions are held by women," said the economics professor.

"This shows that even though the gender gap in education has narrowed, women's presence in high-skill and leadership roles remains very limited."

She also pointed to broader structural issues, including the lack of childcare services and flexible workplace arrangements. "Many educated women initially enter the labour market but later drop out because supportive facilities such as daycare centres and flexible work arrangements are still quite limited."

Resolving these issues will be crucial for improving employment prospects for educated women, she said. "Without creating more opportunities that accommodate women's needs, many qualified female graduates will continue to struggle to find suitable employment."

The ruling Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP) has pledged to address some of these gaps in its electoral manifesto. "Through education and skills development, the government will expand women's employment in the formal sector," it states.

"Increasing women's employment will raise family income and facilitate education for children and poverty reduction targets," it adds.

The manifesto also promises to establish childcare centres at workplaces and set up breastfeeding corners in garment factories, industrial units, offices, and courts where mothers can safely nurse their newborns.

Providing interest-free loans to women in micro, cottage, and small industries, along with tax exemptions and marketing support to increase the self-reliance of women have also been promised.

Munia Zaman, executive director of eco-friendly lifestyle brand Kalindi and an entrepreneur, says many women abandon jobs or never enter the workforce at all because balancing family life and career proves too difficult.

"Some even end their professional careers during motherhood, especially when there is no one to look after their child at home, or they cannot take the child to the office," she said. Reflecting on her own choice to leave a traditional job before venturing into entrepreneurship, she said, "I left to become an entrepreneur because it allows me to balance family, personal life, and work more easily."

Yet entrepreneurship is no panacea. "Many women have tried, and some have succeeded, but most get stuck in documentation or business formalities. The government still has a lot to do to support women in these areas."

Rizwanul Islam, former special adviser for the employment sector at the International Labour Office in Geneva, said that in the absence of rigorous analysis, one can only speculate about the causes of higher female graduate unemployment.

Possible explanations span both supply and demand, and location – rural versus urban – may also matter. The labour market may be segmented along gender lines, he said. "If women prefer certain sectors such as education and health, and opportunities in those areas are limited or stagnant, unemployment is likely to rise."

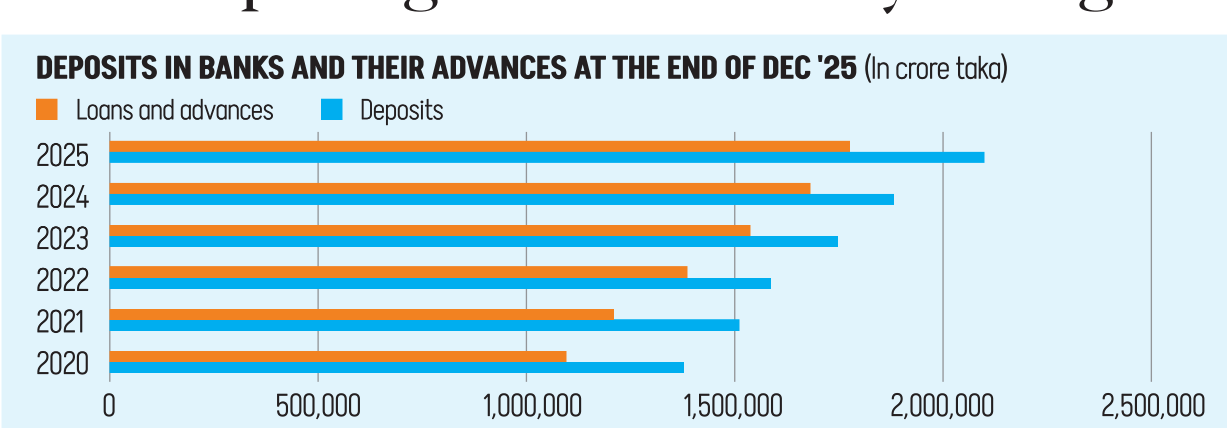
Islam also pointed to a rural-urban divide. "Urban educated women, particularly young job seekers, often show higher unemployment rates than their rural counterparts."

On the education side, he highlighted the role of subject choice. "If they choose fields with limited labour market opportunities, higher unemployment is an inevitable outcome."

He added that gender discrimination in recruitment could be a factor.

"With men dominating managerial positions, this may be a real factor contributing to women's limited access to high-skill jobs."

Bank deposit growth hits five-year high



SOURCE: BB

FROM PAGE B1

The BB had to inject funds into those weak banks to help them overcome a liquidity crisis.

A top banker at a private bank said a number of banks still face challenges in attracting savers.

The Bangladesh Bank Quarterly -- another report by the central bank -- said, "A gradual easing of inflationary pressure apparently halted dissaving by households and businesses, leading to strong inflows into time and savings deposits."

It said the robust expansion of bank deposits reflects increased savings and a higher public propensity to hold financial assets in the formal banking sector.

"This trend was further supported by heightened public confidence in the banking industry, likely resulting from recent political developments that fostered greater stability and trust," it said.

Despite deposit expansion, banks recorded the slowest growth in loans and advances in 2025 amid muted investment demand from the private sector due to rising interest rates and banks' cautious lending to avoid a buildup of default loans. Banks gave Tk 17.77 lakh crore in loans and advances, up 5.6 percent from a year ago.

The BB in its quarterly report said advance growth remained steady, reflecting banks' cautious lending amid high NPLs and tighter monetary policy.

How robust is the balance of payments?

Sadiq Ahmed
writes for Star Business

There is considerable hype on social media about a big turnaround in the balance of payments (BoP) under the interim government. As evidence, numbers with varying degrees of accuracy are cited on the build-up of foreign reserves and the associated reduction in the current account deficit. The objective of this essay is to explain recent developments in the BoP, assess the robustness of the adjustment process, and suggest policy options for moving forward.

The underlying causes of the BoP crisis are long-standing and deep-rooted. The immediate triggers were a series of external shocks relating to Covid-19, the global inflation of 2021-2022, and the Russia-Ukraine war that began on February 24, 2022. These shocks lowered global GDP growth and trade, while raising global commodity prices, inflation and interest rates. Their adverse effects on the BoP of Bangladesh were magnified by poor macroeconomic management, reflected in a fixed exchange rate, artificially low interest rates, large fiscal deficits driven by the Covid-19 response, and excessive use of bank credit to finance these deficits.

As a result, export earnings fell, the cost of imports surged, the volume of trade financing declined, and its cost increased. The net outcome for the BoP was a huge surge in the current account deficit, which reached a record $18.2 billion in FY2022. This sharp increase put pressure on reserves.

The government was initially slow to respond and chose to absorb the shock through reserves. The rapid rundown of reserves soon made clear that this was not sustainable. Bangladesh, therefore, entered a three-year IMF adjustment programme in January 2023. Although policy adjustments began then, most progress occurred between May 2024 and June 2025. Interest rates were deregulated, the exchange rate was unified and made market-based, fiscal deficits were reduced mainly through cuts in public development spending, and bank financing of fiscal deficits was curtailed.

Export earnings recovered in FY2025, remittance income surged, and imports fell sharply. The current account deficit narrowed to a small level in FY2025. The exchange rate stabilised at a realistic level consistent with market behaviour. With strong public capital inflows, Bangladesh reversed the reserve drawdown and recorded a notable balance of payments surplus in FY2025.

How robust is this stability? Can it be sustained as GDP growth and investment recover under a newly elected democratic government?

First, export earnings in FY2025 were still about $7 billion lower than in FY2022. Moreover, in the first eight months of FY2026, exports fell by 3 percent, raising concerns about the outlook for the BoP. On the positive side, the sharp acceleration in remittance earnings, which were $9 billion higher in FY2025 than in FY2022, has been a lifeline.

Second, and most significantly, the value of imports fell by $19.5 billion between FY2022 and FY2025. This decline largely explains the improvement in the current account deficit of $18.1 billion over the same period.

Third, reserves rose modestly by $5 billion in FY2025 and by a further $5 billion in January 2026. However, they are projected to decline during the second half of FY2026 because of weaker exports and a pickup in imports. Overall, barring any major policy setback or a prolonged Iran war, reserves are expected to stabilise at around $30 billion.

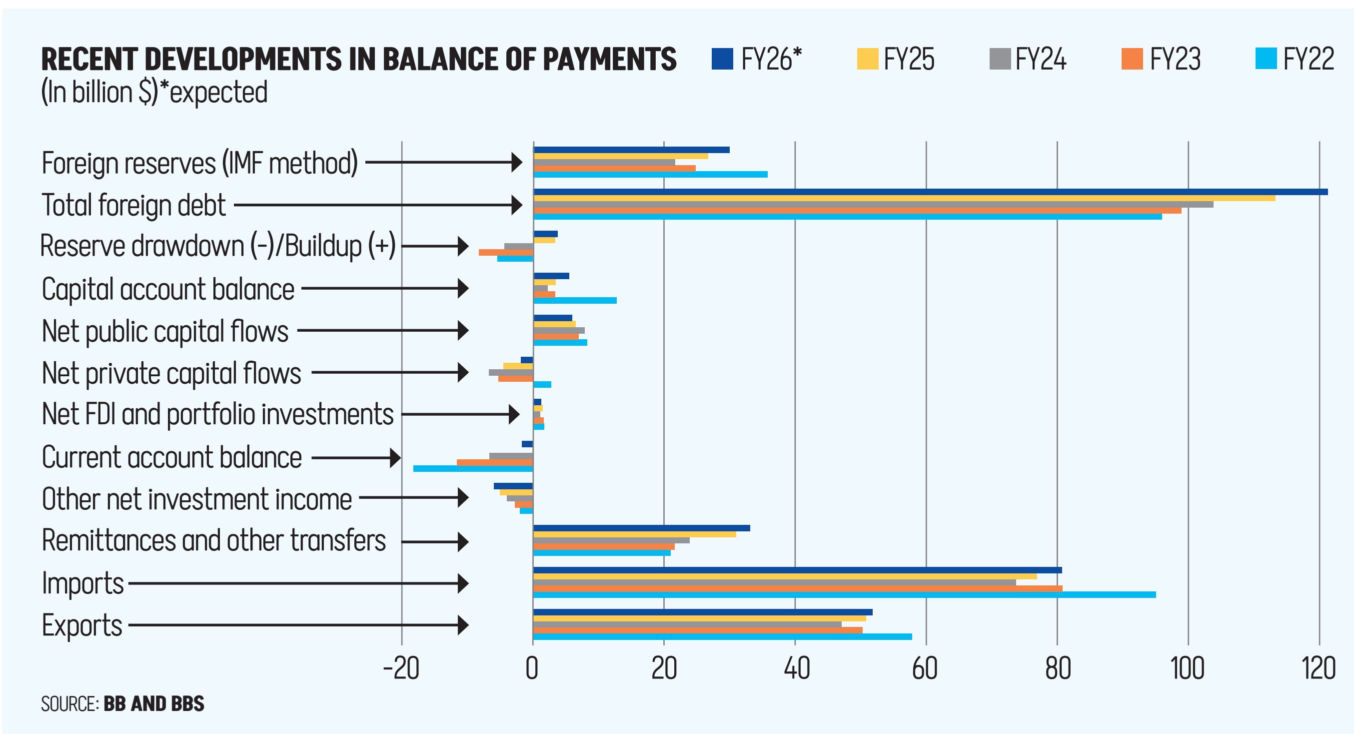
What is often missing in media commentary is recognition that, alongside the reserve build-up, total external borrowing has surged from $103.8 billion in FY2024 to $113.2 billion in FY2025 and is projected to reach $122.8 billion by the end of FY2026. The increase in external debt of $19 billion between FY2024 and FY2026 would far exceed the modest rise in reserves of $7.2 billion.

The fall in imports was initially driven by quantitative restrictions. Although these have been relaxed in recent months, a combination of higher interest rates, depreciation of the real effective exchange rate, improved terms of trade due to lower global commodity prices, and a sharp slowdown in GDP growth has reduced the nominal value of imports in US dollars.

GDP growth slowed to 3.5 percent in FY2025. Negative export growth in the first eight months of FY2026, rising external debt and debt servicing, and the onset of the Iran war raise doubts about the durability of the present BoP situation. Much of the growth slowdown reflects a weaker investment climate, including deterioration in law and order, political uncertainty during the transition to an elected government, energy constraints, cuts in ADP spending, high trade logistics costs, anti-export bias in trade policy, and skills shortages.

With the smooth conduct of a national election and transfer of power to an elected government, the growth outlook has improved. But much will depend on how quickly the new government implements a comprehensive set of reforms on multiple fronts. Importantly, a recovery in economic growth will bring a sharp increase in imports, while higher global energy prices linked to the Iran war will also raise import costs.

Research by Policy Research Institute (PRI) shows that, over the medium to long term, the income elasticity of imports in Bangladesh is around one. This is broadly consistent with findings for India, Sri Lanka, Pakistan, Indonesia and Vietnam.



A recovery in GDP growth will therefore require sufficient BoP space for imports to expand along the long-term trend.

Illustrative projections for FY2025-FY2030 show that if GDP growth rises to 7 percent by FY2030, with inflation falling to 5 percent and the real effective exchange rate remaining stable, imports would need to grow by an average of 10.8 percent per year between FY2025-FY2030. Assuming a sustainable current account deficit of around 1 percent of GDP, combined earnings from exports and remittances would need to grow by about 10.1 percent annually to maintain BoP stability.

What are the policy implications? Alongside policies to reduce inflation to 5 percent, the most fundamental challenge is export diversification. The recent surge in remittances largely reflects a shift of transactions from hundi to formal channels. Over time, remittance growth is likely to stabilise at around 5-6 percent per year. Exports will therefore need to grow in double digits to finance imports linked to stronger GDP growth.

RMG will remain dominant, but double-digit export growth will not be possible without diversification. PRI research shows that this requires reforms in several critical areas. One key requirement is flexible exchange rate management that avoids appreciation of the real effective exchange rate. A fixed nominal rate and sharply appreciating REER between FY2011 and FY2023 proved highly damaging for exports and the BoP. This must be avoided.

A second priority is the removal of the anti-export bias in trade policy. PRI research provides empirical evidence of how this bias has constrained the expansion of non-RMG exports. The recent correction in exchange rate management is welcome and is already benefiting exports and remittances. However, it must be complemented by lower trade protection that currently harms non-RMG exports.

Other priorities include improving the investment climate by addressing constraints in energy, trade logistics, infrastructure and skills. Participation in global value chains, export-oriented foreign direct investment, free trade agreements and greater investment in research and development will also help expand the non-RMG export base.

Policies are also needed to improve the quality of the capital account. The surplus in FY2025 was driven largely by public external borrowing, including exceptional BoP financing from the IMF and other multilateral partners. This was necessary but is clearly a short-term measure. Sustained reserve accumulation will depend on careful management of the current account and a stronger, more diversified export base.

Finally, a sustainable external capital mobilisation strategy is essential. Multilateral medium and long-term financing will remain important. However, debt servicing, particularly amortisation, is rising as access to concessional financing declines and commercial borrowing becomes more prominent. Sustained inflows of foreign direct investment and continued access to trade credit at reasonable cost will therefore be crucial. Strengthening the investment climate and creditworthiness of Bangladesh will help attract these flows.

The writer is vice chairperson of the Policy Research Institute of Bangladesh (PRI). He can be reached at sadiqahmed1952@gmail.com

Celebrating women at work

MAMUN RASHID

There is a particular kind of courage that does not announce itself. It does not arrive with fanfare or a formal declaration. It shows up quietly, in the decision to take the difficult posting when the comfortable one was available, to walk into a room as the only woman and speak first anyway, and to stay in an industry that has spent decades signalling, in many small ways, that you were not quite the intended audience.

Across Bangladesh today, in banks and insurance firms, in factories and startups, this courage is multiplying. The women at the centre of it are not waiting for permission.

Humaira Azam spent three decades in the banking sector, moving through roles that required both technical mastery and the subtler art of building institutional trust. When she became the first female Managing Director of Trust Bank Limited, she was breaking a 50-year pattern. Her career is a case study in what happens when talent meets persistence and refuses to be managed down.

A 2024 report by the International Finance Corporation (IFC) found that women in Bangladesh's banking sector have the highest career aspirations among their peers in emerging South Asian economies, with 89 percent aiming for senior roles. That is not a country short on hunger or drive. What it is short on is the structural infrastructure to honour that ambition, the sponsorship, the flexible pathways, and the absence of unspoken penalties for having a family.

The women who have made it to the top have done so despite those gaps, not because they were fixed. That distinction matters.

Farzanah Chowdhury understood something important about what leadership at the top actually allows you to do. As CEO of Green Delta Insurance, she led the only non-life insurer in Bangladesh to hold equity investment from the IFC. She used her position not merely to excel within the existing frame, but to redraw the frame entirely.

Tamara Hasan Abed at BRAC Enterprises oversees ten social enterprises -- including Aarong -- driven by the philosophy that commercial viability and social impact are not in tension but in service of each other.

This same commitment to evidence-based leadership is seen in Sylvana Quader Sinha, who built Praava Health into a brand the country trusts. For most of her tenure, approximately half of Praava's management team were women. She has said plainly that female leaders attract and develop other female leaders.

There are also younger names like Tasfia Tasbin, who rose through AI startups to build solutions for small businesses from scratch. She framed the higher standard-- turning structural resistance into fuel rather than weight. It is something you see again and again in the women who are reshaping our corporate landscape.

None of this is to suggest the picture is complete, or the work finished. Women currently make up around 17 percent of Bangladesh's banking sector workforce, well below the global average.

The barriers that remain are not invisible or mysterious. They are documented: limited flexibility, cultural expectations around relocation, and a promotion system that too often rewards potential in men while requiring proof in women. Acknowledging these gaps is the minimum required honesty.

Every woman who reaches a senior position in Bangladesh's corporate world does something beyond building her own legacy. She makes the ceiling visible as a ceiling rather than as the natural top of the room. She recalibrates what a young woman entering the workforce in Dhaka believes is possible for herself. This is not a small thing. It compounds in ways that quarterly results cannot capture.

The writer is a banker and economic analyst

Bessent hints at lifting more Russian oil sanctions

AFP, *Washington*

US Treasury Secretary Scott Bessent said Friday his government was considering lifting sanctions on more Russian oil, a day after it temporarily authorized India to buy from Moscow as global oil prices surged.

The US-Israel war on Iran and Tehran's retaliatory attacks across the Gulf region have upended the world's energy and transport sectors, virtually halting activity in the Strait of Hormuz.

Crude soared 8.5 percent on Friday and was up nearly 30 percent for the week after President Donald Trump said only the "unconditional surrender" of Iran would end the Middle East war.

"We may unsanction other Russian oil," Bessent told Fox Business on Friday.

"There are hundreds of millions of barrels of sanctioned crude on the water. And in essence, by unsanctioning them, Treasury can create a supply."

Washington has insisted that the new measures are not aimed at easing restrictions on Moscow, imposed over its conduct in negotiations to end the war in Ukraine, but instead only affect supplies already in transit.

US says it will escort ships in Strait of Hormuz 'soon'

AFP, *Washington*

The US energy secretary said Friday the US Navy was preparing to escort ships through the Strait of Hormuz "as soon as it's reasonable to do it," as traffic through the key trade route remains strangled due to the US-Israel war on Iran.

"As soon as it's reasonable to do it, we'll escort ships through the straits and get the energy moving again," Chris Wright told US broadcaster Fox News's "Fox and Friends" show.

US President Donald Trump had said on Tuesday that the US Navy would "begin escorting tankers through the Strait of Hormuz, as soon as possible" in a bid to avoid disruption of global oil supplies.

A fifth of the world's crude oil and liquefied natural gas travels through the strait.

The US-Israel war on Iran launched a week ago and Tehran's retaliatory attacks across the Gulf region have sent crude prices soaring to their highest in nearly two years -- fanning fears of a fresh spike in inflation that could hit the global economy.

India pushing ahead with Russian oil imports

AFP, *New Delhi*

India said Saturday it was pushing ahead with imports of Russian oil, after a temporary US waiver to import crude from Moscow due war in the Mideast -- but adding it did not need Washington's permission.

The US-Israel campaign against Iran and Tehran's retaliatory attacks across the Gulf region have upended the world's energy and transport sectors, causing a surge in global oil prices.

Washington temporarily eased economic sanctions against Russia on Thursday to allow Russian oil stranded at sea to be sold to India.

But the Indian government's Press Information Bureau said in a statement that New Delhi was not dependent on "a short-term waiver" for such purchases.

"India has never depended on permission from any country to buy Russian oil," the statement said.

"India is still importing Russian oil even in February 2026, and Russia is still India's largest crude oil supplier."

War sends US crude futures up 12% a barrel

REUTERS, *Houston*

US crude futures climbed 12 percent on Friday due to disruptions to global oil supplies because of the expanding US-Israeli war with Iran.

Brent crude futures settled at $92.69 a barrel, up $7.28, or 8.52 percent. West Texas Intermediate crude (WTI) finished at $90.90 a barrel, up $9.89, or 12.21 percent.

In one week, WTI rose 35.63 percent and Brent climbed 27 percent, the biggest weekly gains since the COVID-19 pandemic in Spring 2020.

For the second consecutive day, US crude futures rose more than Brent futures as refiners worldwide scrambled to buy alternative crude to plug the gap left by disruption to Middle East supplies.

"Refiners and trading houses are searching for alternative barrels, and the US is the largest producer," said Giovanni Staunovo, an analyst with UBS.

Several factors contributed to the divergence in gains between WTI and Brent on Friday, said Janiv Shah, vice president of oil analytics at Rystad Energy.

'Plenty of oil' in market despite turmoil: IEA chief

AFP, *Brussels*

International Energy Agency (IEA) chief Fatih Birol sought Friday to tamp down fears of a global oil crisis as conflict rages in the Middle East, saying there was "plenty of oil in the market."

The US-Israel war on Iran and Tehran's retaliatory attacks across the Gulf region have sent crude prices soaring -- fanning fears of a fresh spike in inflation that could hit the global economy.

Addressing reporters in Brussels, Birol said "logistical disruption" from the war was "creating challenges for many countries" but stressed there was more than enough oil in the global market.

Asked whether the IEA was mulling the release of emergency stocks, Birol said "all options are on the table" but that "at this stage" there were no plans for "collective action".

"There is plenty of oil, we have no oil shortage," he said, after a meeting with European Union chief Ursula von der Leyen and EU commissioners. "There is a huge surplus in the market."

"We are facing a temporary disruption, a logistical disruption," he said.