

From ridicule

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based products from her production line named MA Jute Products, including jute yarn bags, office bags, tissue bags, pen holders and various decorative items. Currently, 22 women work regularly at her production unit, including eight working from their homes.

At present, products worth around Tk 1 lakh are sold from her production unit monthly. After all expenses, she earns around Tk 60,000 in profit.

During this time, she also provided training to around 8,000 individuals, including around 6,000 women, free of charge. For her selfless contribution to help women achieve self-reliance, she was recognised as the district's best 'Joyita' in 2022. In the same year, she received the Best Youth Award from the then prime minister.

Meanwhile, Asma completed her graduation from Damudya Government College in Shariatpur in 2020.

Recently, she began exporting her jute products to Oman, and discussions are currently underway to export her products to Italy and the UAE as well. The Department of Environment in Shariatpur has also collected jute yarn bags in an effort to discourage the use of polythene.

"Among my seven siblings, I am the only one with a physical disability. I wanted to become self-reliant; I did not want anyone to consider me a burden on society. That is why I became an entrepreneur," Asma said.

"I also wanted to uplift other women. So far, I have provided free training to at least 6,000 women at my workshop. Some of them were later employed in my production unit," she also said.

Asma added that she receives a large number of orders from across the country and abroad. However, due to a lack

of capital, she often has to cancel some of those orders.

"So far, I have reinvested around Tk 10 lakh in my ventures from my revenues. If the government provided any financial incentives, or if any government or private organisation came forward with financial assistance, I could enhance my production capacity and export more goods abroad. At present, I do not have the kind of capital required to produce in larger quantities for international markets," she said.

"There are many women like me who aspire to become entrepreneurs despite their limitations. If the government arranged easy access to low-interest or interest-free loans for them, it would help them to become successful entrepreneurs," Asma added.

Subarna Akter, 18, a second-year student of Shariatpur Government College, has been working at Asma Akter's workshop for the past year while continuing her studies.

"I work here alongside my studies, earning around Tk 10,000-15,000 monthly. I use this income to cover my educational expenses and contribute to my family," she said.

Antika Mostari Hima, 28, a housewife, has also been working at Asma's workshop for the past two years. She earns around Tk 12,000-15,000 per month, which has brought financial stability to her family.

Md Russel Noman, DoE assistant director in Shariatpur, said, "As an alternative to polythene, we placed an order for 300 jute yarn bags from her. These bags are completely environmentally friendly. As a woman entrepreneur, she is also contributing to environmental protection. Her achievements deserve widespread recognition."

He called upon others to come forward and support such women entrepreneurs.

PM vows equal

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the education, health, security and participation are ensured.

"In this context, I believe this year's theme of International Women's Day is very significant," he said.

He mentioned that nearly half of the world's population is women, and development is not possible if they remain outside the mainstream of the state, government and politics.

"In particular, if women's economic empowerment is not ensured, the benefits of overall development cannot be fully achieved," he said.

Tarique Rahman highlighted the roles of former president Ziaur Rahman and former prime minister Begum Khaleda Zia in women's political and economic empowerment.

The Prime Minister also said the government

has introduced the "Family Card" programme to support women's economic empowerment and remains committed to ensuring women's effective participation in all sectors, including education, the economy, health and politics.

"Our goal is to implement our election pledges by introducing free education up to the postgraduate level, increasing women's participation in higher education, providing free school uniforms for girls and expanding digital learning facilities and modern education systems," he said.

The Prime Minister said the government is also giving top priority to ensuring women's safety and has taken a strong stance against cyberbullying and online harassment targeting women.

Ensure greater

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of party nominations in the recent polls, and just over eight percent of them managed to win.

Lila Arifa Khanom, a women's rights activist, said the election had raised hopes of restoring democratic practices in the country and increasing women's participation in politics.

"However, the Women's Reform Commission's recommendation that political parties allocate at least 50 percent of nominations to women and the women's movement's demand for a minimum of 33 percent, were not met," she said.

On average, women received only 3.98 percent of nominations, she said, adding that Jamaat-e-Islami did not nominate any female candidates.

The activists reiterated their demand for filling reserved seats in parliament through direct elections instead of nominations by political parties.

They also called for greater participation of women in parliamentary activities and leadership roles, transparent guidelines for nominating candidates to reserved seats, and stronger action against violence against women.

The programme was supported by Women with Disabilities Development Foundation, Karmojibi Nari, Shakti Foundation, ActionAid Bangladesh, Brotee, Breaking the Silence, Gonoshasthaya Kendra, BRAC, CARE Bangladesh, Save the Children, BLAST, Disable Child Foundation, Naripokkh and several others.

Scuffle at Shahbagh

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playing the March 7 speech on a loudspeaker in the Chankharpul area.

Police brought him to the station for his own safety, fearing he might come under attack, he said.

Following the detention, Sheikh Tasnim Afroz Emi, who contested for the vice-president post in the Ducus election 2025, announced on Facebook that the March 7 speech would be played in front of Shahbagh Police Station.

Around 9:30pm, several DU students and some leaders and activists of Bangladesh Chhatra Union gathered in front of the police station.

At one stage, while the speech was being played through loudspeakers, some individuals approached from the direction of the police station and asked them to stop it, leading to a verbal altercation.

Shortly afterwards, another group arrived and attempted to obstruct the programme, which escalated into a clash between the two sides. When asked, those opposing the playing of the speech identified themselves as "general people".

Later, leaders and activists of Jatiya Chhatra Shakti's Dhaka University unit arrived at the scene and chanted slogans opposing the playing of the speech.

Ducus leaders, including Literary and Cultural Affairs Secretary Musaddiq Ali Ibne Mohammad and Social Welfare Secretary AB Zubair, also reached the spot.

Around 10:30pm, activists of Jatiya Chhatra Shakti, along with AB Zubair and Musaddiq, took Emi - who was sitting on

a rickshaw carrying the microphone - along with the rickshaw to Shahbagh Police Station.

Videos circulating on social media show that around 10:45pm, Chhatra Shakti activists and some protesters assaulted a DU student, Al Mamun, accusing him of being affiliated with the Chhatra League.

Mamun, a student of the 2020-21 academic session, was beaten and initially forced out of the police station before being dragged back inside the premises. At one point, an individual was seen pulling Emi by the hair from behind.

Later, both Emi and Mamun were handed over to the police.

Earlier around 9:30pm, some former Ducus leaders and local people chased those demonstrating in front of the station, Masud said. During the incident, two journalists were injured while filming.

Police later rescued the two journalists, he added.

DC Masud said police have collected CCTV footage and are trying to identify those responsible for attacking the journalists.

A case was being filed over the incident while the detained man remained in custody, he said.

Earlier yesterday, police arrested at least six people while they were attempting to march in a procession to place a wreath at the residence of Sheikh Mujibur Rahman at Dhanmondi 32, marking the day.

The detainees are Runa Begum, 50; Janata Begum, 65; Akchhari Kahn Urmii, 18; Shohel Miji, 48; Mohammad Moniruzzaman, 36; and Mohammad Jasim Uddin, 40.

They leave with hope, return with scars

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But the dream quickly turned into a nightmare.

Liza says she was sold between four households and subjected to severe abuse and sexual violence. On February 9 this year, she returned to Bangladesh when she was six months pregnant.

Airport authorities later referred her to a migration support programme run by BRAC. She is now uncertain about how she will rebuild her life.

Her experience is not unique.

Rizia Begum from Barlekha in Moulvibazar went to the Middle Eastern country six years back in the hope of better supporting her family. She was a domestic help.

She was subjected to long working hours, insufficient food, and repeated abuse. Eventually, she fell ill and lost contact with her family.

For nearly five years, her relatives believed that she died.

In February this year, she was found at Dhaka's Hazrat Shahjalal International Airport in a mentally unstable condition. With assistance from BRAC's Migration Welfare Centre and the Police Bureau of Investigation, her identity was confirmed and she was reunited with her family after 13 days.

She is now undergoing treatment for her mental health.

Stories like those of Liza and Rizia highlight the darker reality behind Bangladesh's growing female labour migration.

Over the past decade, the number of Bangladeshi women migrating for work has increased significantly.

According to the Bureau of Manpower, Employment, and Training, more than one million Bangladeshi women are currently working abroad. However, there is no official record of how many have returned after facing difficulties.

Data from BRAC's migration programme suggests that at least

70,000 women have returned to Bangladesh over the last seven years, many of them reporting various forms of abuse.

In addition, according to the Wage Earners' Welfare Board, the bodies of 799 female migrant workers have been brought back home over the past eight years.

Most death certificates mention suicide as the cause. However, many families suspect abuse or foul play.

In several cases, relatives say they noticed marks of physical violence on the bodies.

According to the home ministry, more than 6,000 women became victims of human trafficking between 2012 and 2025.

These realities come into focus as the world marks International Women's Day today under the theme "For all women and girls: rights, equality, and empowerment."

Advocates say the rights and safety of women working abroad must also be part of that conversation.

SAUDI ARABIA
Bangladesh began sending female migrant workers abroad in 1991, although only a few thousand left each year initially. The numbers began increasing after 2004 and crossed 50,000 annually in 2013. A major turning point came in 2015 when Bangladesh signed an agreement with Saudi Arabia to send female domestic helps.

Since then, the number of women leaving for work abroad often exceeded 100,000 annually, except during the Covid-19 pandemic.

More than half a million Bangladeshi women have travelled to Saudi Arabia in the past decade alone.

While many send remittances home and improve their families' economic condition, thousands have returned with traumatic experiences.

There is no comprehensive national database on returning

Workplaces to Himalayas

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The programme also celebrated a unique Himalayan expedition inspired by Begum Rokeya's "Sultana's Dream," which was inscribed in UNESCO's Memory of the World register in 2024.

A team of five women trekked through the Himalayas to mark the achievement. Representing the team, Yasmin Lisa spoke about the social stigma surrounding female autonomy.

"We are still asked how five women can travel to the Himalayas 'alone'," she said. "Because we do not have a male companion with us, society assumes we are alone."

She also described the physical hardships of the trek, recalling that the team once went 12 hours without water after failing to melt ice in the extreme cold.

Sharmin Farhana Chowdhury, former athlete and founder of Sports for Hope and Independence (SHI), spoke about administrative challenges faced by young athletes.

Although her team recently won three gold medals and one bronze in an international competition, she said obtaining travel documents remains a major obstacle.

"Obtaining travel documents for underprivileged and differently abled children is an ordeal. It sometimes feels as if the authorities are reluctant to issue them," she said, urging the government to prioritise such cases so athletes can represent Bangladesh internationally.

The political segment, moderated by Prothom Alo Editor and Publisher Matiur Rahman, featured women

who contested the 13th National Parliamentary Election.

Matiur Rahman praised their courage in navigating unequal power structures and said the newspaper would continue to highlight their experiences.

Dr Manisha Chakraborty, a candidate from the Democratic Left Alliance, said the 22,486 votes she received represent a "new political current".

"Sometimes losing can mark the beginning of a new journey towards victory. We are striving to build a society based on equality rather than power-centric politics," she said.

Nabila Tasnid, an engineer who contested the Dhamrai constituency, described the intimidation she faced at polling stations.

Comparing her determination to the "violinist on the Titanic" who played until the end, she said, "I may have lost the count, but when people in Dhamrai told me, 'You are the MP of our hearts,' I knew I had won the battle that truly matters."

Mahia Juned, additional managing director of City Bank, spoke about the bank's efforts to promote financial literacy and economic opportunities for women.

She said City Bank is the first institution in Bangladesh to receive EDGE Certification, an international standard for gender equality.

Juned also mentioned a pilot project with UNFPA in which 120 underprivileged girls were trained in pharmacy and later recruited.

"True change is possible through empathy and by creating opportunities for one another in the

workplace," she said.

The event was attended by several prominent figures, including Tamara Hasan Abed, chairperson of the board of trustees of BRAC University, and Rupali Haque Chowdhury, chairperson of the Prothom Alo Trust.

Political leaders who shared their experiences included Barrister Rumeen Farhana, newly elected MP for Brahmanbaria 2; Taslima Akhter, candidate for Dhaka-12 and president of Bangladesh Garment Sramik Sanghati; and former upazila chairman Sabira Sultana, candidate for Jashore-2.

Stepfather

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the house of his colleague Suman. On the way, he killed her by strangling her with her scarf.

Terming her involvement with Nur "socially inappropriate activities", Ashraf said it caused him frustration as he faced repeated social humiliation because of it, which ultimately led him to commit the murder.

Earlier, on February 10 at midnight, the girl was allegedly gang-raped at the house of Hazrat Ali. Police investigations found involvement of Hazrat Ali, Ebadul, Jaman, and Gaffar in the incident.

On February 26, locals found Amena's body lying in a mustard field in Darikandi, Kotowalir Char, and informed police.

On the same day, the victim's mother, Fahima Begum, filed a case with Madhabdi Police Station naming nine people as accused.

Police later arrested seven of the named suspects, including Nur.

Meanwhile, former Mahishshura Union Parishad member and union BNP unit vice-president Ahammad Ali Dewan has been expelled from his party position following allegations of his involvement in the incident.

According to the case statement, a few of the accused allegedly tried to cover up the rape incident and later threatened the victim's family as they failed to do so.

Misuse of religion

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resources and justice," he said, adding that ignoring these principles led to the birth of Bangladesh in 1971 and continuing unrest in Balochistan.

Altaf also traced the roots of religiously divided politics in the subcontinent to British colonial rule. After the failed uprising of 1857, colonial authorities realised that dividing Hindus and Muslims politically would help them maintain control, he said.

"They gradually took steps to divide the two communities and place them in opposition to one another," he added.

Jagannath University Islamic Studies Associate Professor Md Ebrahim Khalil said Abul Mansur Ahmad's essay, written more than two decades after the creation of Pakistan, remains relevant today.

"The same contradictions, the same misuse of religion, the same collapse of thought are still present in our society," Khalil said.

He said religion is often used not to establish justice but to consolidate political power.

Khalil said political leaders frequently invoke religion to gain public support. He cited the example of election campaigns beginning with visits to the shrine of Shahjalal, even though many politicians otherwise show little commitment to religious practice.

Khalil also referred to historical examples in Islamic history where rulers attempted to use religion to legitimise their authority.

A pragmatic

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cooperation extended to Bangladesh by different countries and international organisations.

Shafiqur Rahman added that his party would extend cooperation to Prime Minister Tarique Rahman, his cabinet members and other relevant stakeholders, assuring that Jamaat's role both inside and outside the parliament would remain constructive and responsible.

He said Islamic values would shape the broader framework of Jamaat's engagement with the global community. His party firmly opposes extremism and terrorism and seeks to demonstrate through policy and action that Islam is compatible with democracy, inclusivity and peaceful international relations, he added.

He further said Jamaat is committed to protecting the rights and dignity of all ethnic and religious groups in the country.

The party also aims to promote good governance, judicial independence and a relentless fight against corruption, he added.

Shafiqur Rahman said Jamaat's public messaging would focus on development, trade, investment, climate issues and connectivity to ensure tangible benefits for the people of Bangladesh through cooperation with the international community.

Ambassadors from the US, China, Russia, the UK, Palestine, the European Union, Canada, India, Türkiye, France, Germany, Italy, Pakistan, Singapore, Malaysia, Vatican City, Iran, Brunei, Maldives, Algeria, Kosovo, Egypt, Vietnam, Myanmar, Indonesia, Australia, Norway, Nepal, the Philippines, the Netherlands, Bhutan, Sri Lanka, Brazil, Switzerland and South Korea, and representatives from international organisations including UNDP, UNHCR, UNICEF, UNODC, Democracy International and IOM, attended the iftar programme.