

Justice that lets every woman and girl live free from fear

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This year's International Women's Day theme, "Rights. Justice. Action. For ALL Women and Girls," is a call to overcome structural barriers that deny women and girls equal access to justice, such as unequal laws, weak enforcement, discriminatory practices and harmful social norms that undermine rights and perpetuate violence.

Across the globe, democratic space is narrowing and hard-won gains for gender equality are under pressure. Women and girls continue to face legal and social systems that institutionalise inequality and restrict their access to protection and redress. In 2026, women worldwide enjoy only 64 per cent of the legal rights held by men (World Bank), leaving them disadvantaged in areas ranging from employment and financial security to safety, property ownership and mobility. Without meaningful access to justice, rights remain promises on paper rather than lived realities.

In Bangladesh, the experience of survivors underscores the need to further reform protection systems. As one survivor of sexual violence shared: "When I went to seek redress, I felt like the system saw everything except my pain. I kept asking myself: if justice isn't for women like me, then who is it for? I stayed quiet for years because I thought no one would believe me. Speaking up was the only way for me to survive, but the journey to justice has been harder than the violence itself." Her words echo the lived realities of many women and girls.

The 2024 National Violence Against Women Survey reveals that 54 per cent of women in Bangladesh have experienced physical and/or sexual violence in their lifetime, yet 64 per cent never told anyone. Silence is rarely a choice; it is often a survival strategy shaped by stigma, fear of retaliation, economic dependency and a lack of confidence in formal

systems. When survivors do not see a clear, compassionate and effective path to justice, the system itself becomes another source of harm.

Recent steps by the Government of Bangladesh to strengthen legal protections are both timely

and necessary. New ordinances addressing domestic violence and sexual harassment in workplaces, educational institutions and online spaces, together with commitments to review the Child Marriage Restraint Act, signal a willingness to close systemic gaps. These measures reflect a life-cycle approach to protection, recognising that adolescent girls, young women, women in the home and workplace, women with disabilities, older women and transgender women face different and intersecting risks.



VISUAL: FATIMA JAHAN ENA

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Access to justice is inseparable from the realisation of women's rights. Violence against women and

with accessible health and social services is essential to ensure a multisectoral response that will enable women and girls to seek help safely and with dignity.

Reformed legislation contributes to Bangladesh's commitments under the Sustainable Development Goals, particularly Goals 5 and 16, as well as international frameworks such as the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW), the Beijing Platform for Action and ILO Convention 190. These instruments, as well as the Commission on the Status of Women 70 platform, help close legal gaps by expanding definitions, extending

protections across physical and digital spaces and acknowledging technology-facilitated gender-based violence. The Cyber Security Ordinance (2025) further strengthens efforts to address online abuse, which disproportionately affects women

and girls.

At the same time, legal reform must be comprehensive. Certain inequitable provisions within personal laws, dowry-related practices and aspects of rape legislation continue to undermine full equality before the law. Addressing these gaps with urgency and consultation is critical to building a coherent and

rights-based legal framework.

Laws, however, only matter if they work for survivors. Justice must be visible, accessible and humane. Internal complaint committees must be functional, independent and trusted. Reporting mechanisms must be safe and confidential. Police, health providers, social workers, legal aid services, employers and educational institutions must coordinate effectively to ensure timely referrals and survivor-centred support. Multi-sectoral response systems anchored in trained social service professionals and quality case management must be available to all survivors, regardless of age, marital status, disability, ethnicity, location or gender identity.

Adequate financing is equally essential. Legal reforms without resources for implementation, monitoring and oversight risk remaining symbolic. Investment in training for law enforcement, judicial actors, health providers and social workers is critical to ensure that survivors are treated with respect and that cases are handled ethically and efficiently. Strengthened data systems, including those addressing technology-facilitated violence, are necessary to track progress, inform policy and hold institutions accountable. Supporting women's movements and women's rights organizations, which have long driven legal reform and accountability, is also needed.

Preventing child marriage is also central to advancing justice. Child marriage remains both a driver and a consequence of gender inequality and gender-based violence, cutting short girls' education, exposing them to early pregnancy, which increases their vulnerability to abuse, and closing the door to future opportunities. Ensuring that the Child Marriage Restraint Act is aligned with international human rights standards and effectively enforced will protect girls' rights,

health and futures.

Public awareness and community engagement must accompany legal change. Women, girls and young people need accessible information about their rights and available services and the removal of all barriers to accessing these. Men and boys must be engaged as allies in challenging harmful norms and supporting equality. Community and religious leaders, sports champions, musicians and artists can be powerful in a movement to bring about this change for the women and girls of Bangladesh.

Above all, we must be clear: gender-based violence and child marriage are preventable. Strong laws are powerful instruments for shaping safer, more equal societies when enforced with commitment, care and accountability. Justice is about restoring dignity, rebuilding trust and ensuring that every woman and girl can live free from fear.

The United Nations, including UNFPA and UN Women, stands firmly with the women and girls, men and boys of Bangladesh, calling for the conservation and extension of gains made and for translating commitments into action. Together, we can ensure equality in law and in practice, so that rights are realised not in theory but in the everyday lives of all women and girls across Bangladesh.

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TRIBUNUNALS ON TRIAL

The justice gap in crimes against women and children



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Bangladesh built a network of specialised tribunals to ensure swift accountability for crimes against women and children. Yet rising violence, low conviction rates, and institutional backlogs are testing whether these courts can still deliver the justice they were created to provide.

Across Bangladesh, reports of violence against women and children have once again dominated headlines. From the hill districts of Bandarban to the plains of Kushtia, incidents of rape, domestic abuse, and exploitation continue with alarming frequency. A troubling question arises: if the country has stringent laws and specialised tribunals to punish such crimes, why do these atrocities persist? Police records indicate 5,191 rape cases in 2023 and 4,394 in 2024, with nearly 10,000 cases reported between January 2023 and January 2025 - roughly 13 victims every day. Two decades ago, Bangladesh created the Women and Children Repression Prevention Act 2000, establishing specialised tribunals to deliver swift trials and severe punishments within 180 days. Today, however, this system faces a profound test.

Despite the ambitious design of

Bangladesh's specialised tribunals, their performance reveals deep challenges. Over 150,000 cases involving women and children remain pending nationwide, with each tribunal handling more than 1,500 cases, overwhelming judges and staff. Statutory deadlines of 180 days for trial completion are rarely met; some cases drag on for five years or more, leaving survivors trapped in an exhausting legal limbo. Delays weaken cases: witnesses become unavailable, evidence deteriorates, and victims face pressure to withdraw complaints. Between 2020 and mid-2025, more than 31,000 rape cases

The challenges are not only about numbers; they are also about institutional design. The number of tribunals is far below what is needed, prompting judicial associations to call for hundreds more. Many tribunals lack adequate staff and infrastructure, with overcrowded courtrooms and limited facilities for victims, especially children, creating intimidating environments. Coordination between investigators, prosecutors, and judges is often inconsistent: delayed police

the law's promise and reality is stark: swift, credible justice remains the exception, not the norm.

Investigative capacity within the police should be strengthened, and prosecutors require specialised training in handling gender-based violence cases. Robust victim protection - including witness protection, psychological support, and confidential reporting - can encourage more survivors to

fraction of the true scale of gender-based violence. These institutional and social gaps highlight a central tension: the law promises speed, but the system struggles to deliver.

Despite these challenges, abandoning the tribunal system is not the answer. Specialised courts remain one of the most important mechanisms for addressing crimes against women and children, but meaningful reform is urgently needed. Bangladesh must expand judicial capacity by creating additional tribunals and appointing more specialised judges to prevent the backlog from growing further.

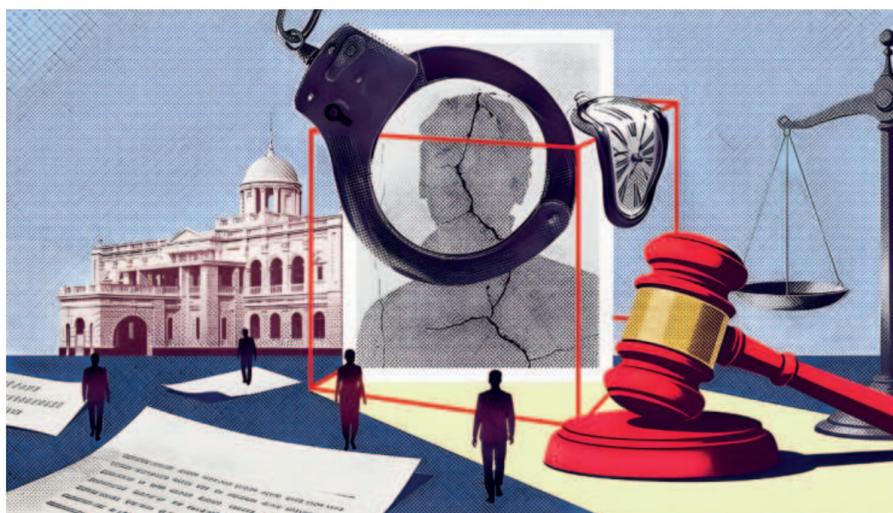


ILLUSTRATION: ANWAR SOHEL

were reported, yet conviction rates remain alarmingly low. Systemic weaknesses - including delayed investigations, absent witnesses, social stigma, intimidation, financial pressure and stay orders from higher courts, make justice slow, uncertain, and emotionally draining for survivors. The contrast between

investigations and overburdened prosecutors further slow the process. Beyond structural weaknesses, social and cultural factors - including early marriage, household power imbalances, stigma and fear of retaliation, discourage victims from seeking justice. Consequently, official statistics likely capture only a

Investigative capacity within the police should be strengthened, and prosecutors require specialised training in handling gender-based violence cases. Robust victim protection - including witness protection, psychological support, and confidential reporting - can encourage more survivors to

pursue justice. Modern case-management tools, such as digital records, automated scheduling, and monitoring systems, are also essential to ensure statutory deadlines are respected. The effectiveness of these tribunals is a measure of institutional health. Institutions must evolve to meet the scale and complexity of violence; otherwise, legal promises remain unfulfilled.

In addition to existing tribunals, Bangladesh has recently established Child Rape Prevention Tribunals, operating alongside the Women and Children Repression Prevention Tribunals. These new courts signal renewed hope for victims while sending a clear warning to offenders: crimes against children will face swift and serious judicial scrutiny. Early indications suggest that the presence of these tribunals has begun to accelerate proceedings and improve the visibility of justice in high-profile cases. However, their effectiveness will depend on addressing broader structural issues - adequate staffing, infrastructure, coordination, and victim protection - to ensure they do not face the same delays and bottlenecks that have plagued existing tribunals.

A closer look at the numbers underscores the gravity of the crisis. Police statistics show that only 2.61

Police statistics show that only 2.61 percent of women-related cases and 0.52 percent of child-related cases resulted in convictions in early 2025. By contrast, the overall criminal conviction rate in Bangladesh is approximately 28 percent. Low conviction rates reflect systemic challenges: victims withdraw complaints due to social pressure, investigations are delayed, evidence is lost, and defendants secure stay orders.

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Laws alone cannot protect the vulnerable; institutions must deliver. Bangladesh has enshrined some of South Asia's strongest legal protections for women and children, and specialised tribunals were designed to ensure justice that is swift, visible, and certain. Yet a system measured by promises rather than outcomes risks losing public trust. Every delayed verdict sends a quiet but dangerous signal that violence may go unpunished. Restoring faith in these tribunals is both a legal and moral imperative. Ultimately, the strength of Bangladesh's justice system will be judged not by its laws, but by whether women and children can trust that justice will arrive before hope runs out.