

Fix the system that fails abuse survivors Stop tech-facilitated violence against women

We are deeply worried to see the upward trend in technology-facilitated gender-based violence (TFGBV) in the country. As smartphones and digital platforms become increasingly embedded in our everyday life, the misuse of these technologies to harass, blackmail and exploit women has emerged as a serious threat. A recent report by this daily reveals how women who experience digital abuse often find themselves trapped not only by the perpetrators, but also by a system that is ill-equipped to deliver justice and support.

According to the 2024 National Violence Against Women Survey, 8.3 percent of women in Bangladesh have experienced TFGBV. Such abuse ranges from covert filming and non-consensual sharing of images to blackmail and harassment on digital platforms. For many victims, the consequences extend far beyond the digital sphere, leading to severe emotional distress, social stigma and even family breakdowns. The experience of a small entrepreneur from Bagerhat, as reported in this daily, reveals how devastating such crimes can be. Secretly filmed by a neighbour and later blackmailed, she was living under constant fear. When she finally refused to meet the perpetrator's demands, manipulated clips were sent to her husband, who responded with violence and divorce.

Unfortunately, when survivors seek justice, they often encounter a fragmented and inadequate response system. Reportedly, the overall response to tech-facilitated abuse remains heavily police-centred, with limited coordination across health, legal and judicial services. A small number of cyber tribunals, inadequate technical capacity and insufficient expertise in handling digital evidence further weaken the system. Survivors also face insensitive questioning during investigations as officers lack proper training on the gendered nature of digital abuse.

While some steps have been taken to counter this, such as training officers on gender-based violence and digital abuse and setting up help desks in some districts, these initiatives remain limited and constrained by resource gaps. In some places, help desks lack even a computer, forcing survivors to share personal details with outside operators just to file a complaint. Many investigators, lawyers and judges lack specialised training in handling digital evidence, and forensic analysis—crucial in cybercrime cases—remains optional. Crisis centres are often understaffed, and coordination between institutions is weak. When cases are forwarded to national cyber units due to limited local capacity, the absence of an effective tracking system can leave complaints in a stagnant state for months.

Addressing TFGBV requires a far more comprehensive response. Law enforcement agencies, prosecutors and judges must receive specialised training to deal with cyber-related crimes and digital evidence. Forensic examination should be made mandatory, and cyber tribunals must be strengthened with adequate resources and expertise. Coordination between police, health services, crisis centres and legal aid institutions is also essential. At the same time, women and girls must be taught digital literacy, made aware of technology-facilitated crimes, and given clear guidance on where to seek help. Ensuring women's safety online must remain a national priority, with a system that protects survivors and holds perpetrators accountable.

Appoint information commissioners

Govt must amend RTI 2026 ordinance further before passing it

We second the Right to Information (RTI) Forum's call to immediately appoint information commissioners and further amend the RTI (Amendment) Ordinance, 2026, before passing it in the upcoming parliamentary session. It is a shame that the Information Commission has been left without leadership for 18 months, after all three previous commissioners resigned following the July 2024 uprising. Despite repeated calls since then from rights activists and civil society organisations (CSOs), the interim government did not appoint new commissioners.

Although it did amend the 2009 RTI law, it skipped several important changes proposed by CSOs. For instance, the 2026 amendments expanded the definition of "information" to include memoranda, maps, contracts, and audiovisual materials, but left out official note sheets. Furthermore, local government bodies, private entities operating under government contracts or licences, and political parties registered with the Election Commission have not been brought under the purview of the law. CSOs also urged the government to review Section 7 of the RTI Act, 2009, which outlines the categories of information that public, autonomous, and statutory organisations, as well as private institutions constituted or run by the government or through foreign financing, are not required to publish or provide. However, many government departments may misuse the clauses in this section to withhold crucial information. Therefore, it is pertinent that these amendments be made.

Nevertheless, the appointment of information commissioners is even more urgent. Without them, citizens cannot file complaints with the commission when their right to access information is denied. As stipulated in the current RTI Act, when a designated officer of an organisation that falls within the scope of the law fails to provide requested information to a citizen, the latter has the right to appeal to the appellate authority within the same office. If the appellate authority does not take any action, the citizen can then complain to the commission. But without commissioners, there has been no one to take citizens' complaints into cognisance. As a result, more than 1,000 complaints are already pending.

Therefore, the government should take immediate steps to form the Information Commission and introduce a time limit within which the commissioners must be appointed. This will help avoid long vacancies in these crucial posts in the future. It goes without saying that the independence of the commission must be ensured by appointing qualified, non-partisan individuals. To ensure transparency, the appointment committee should include CSO members and rights activists. The government must take all necessary measures to ensure that this vital organisation functions properly.

Empowering women beyond symbolic progress



MACRO MIRROR

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Observed for over a century, the International Women's Day (IWD) is more than just a celebration; it is about recognising women's accomplishments and reflecting on progress towards achieving gender equality. This year, the day's observance underscored an urgent call for action. The theme "Rights. Justice. Action. For ALL Women and Girls" stresses turning commitments into tangible change. Around the world, millions of women and girls encounter legal discrimination, social challenges, and restricted opportunities. The theme emphasises that safeguarding women's rights requires legal acknowledgement, fair justice, and proactive efforts to dismantle structural barriers.

Bangladesh should find the slogan "Rights. Justice. Action" especially relevant and timely. Over the past five decades, the country has made remarkable progress in women's empowerment. It has earned global recognition for improving girls' education, reducing maternal mortality, and expanding economic opportunities for women. Millions of women have entered the workforce in the RMG industry, which remains the country's primary export-earning sector. Bangladeshi women's presence is prominent in all three broad sectors of the economy: agriculture, industry, and services. Moreover, the country has a distinguished record of women serving in top government leadership positions, with two female prime ministers ruling the country for more than three decades.

Despite these achievements, numerous challenges still persist. Women's participation in the workforce is still significantly lower than that of men: female labour force participation stands at 38.4 percent, compared to around 80 percent for men, according to the Labour Force Survey 2024. Women are mainly employed in informal, low-wage jobs with limited social protection, job security, and career growth prospects.

Child marriage, gender-based violence, and unequal access to financial resources further impact the lives of women and girls across the country.

These facts highlight that progress in terms of development indicators does not automatically guarantee greater equality. Structural barriers still restrict women's access to opportunities in many areas. A clear example of this is the state of women's participation in national politics.

Despite the country's history of women holding top political roles, their

generally seen as a male domain, and women who seek leadership often encounter doubt or discouragement. Family responsibilities and caregiving duties further limit women's ability to pursue demanding political roles. In some settings, religious and/or cultural convictions reinforce these notions, implying that political leadership is only suitable for men.

The limited presence of women in politics has notable implications. Underrepresentation of women in decision-making can lead to public policies that overlook the issues and experiences of half the population. Important topics such as maternal health, childcare, workplace equality, and gender-based violence often receive less attention when women are excluded from policymaking.

Evidence from around the world suggests that women's greater involvement in politics strengthens democratic governance. Legislatures

they face obstacles like limited authority and social resistance, these roles offer crucial opportunities for improving women's political involvement. Local government participation serves as a training ground for future national leaders. Women gaining experience in union parishads and similar bodies gain leadership skills, grow community connections, and get a boost in their confidence for facing greater political challenges. Increasing women's involvement in local governance is, therefore, vital for improving representation at the national stage.

Achieving the objectives of "Rights. Justice. Action" requires more than political engagement. It demands collective efforts across all levels of society. The government should improve legal safeguards and ensure that survivors of discrimination and violence have effective access to justice. The private sector needs to create more opportunities for women in employment and leadership positions. Civil society organisations should continue to advocate for gender equality and confront harmful social norms. Development partners may support reforms and initiatives that promote women's economic and social empowerment. The media plays a crucial role in highlighting women's achievements and exposing discrimination, thereby fostering more progressive public attitudes.

Women continue to be the primary drivers of change, significantly impacting Bangladesh's economic and social growth. Their progress is fuelled by education, entrepreneurship, leadership, and collective advocacy. Bangladesh's success is rooted in the efforts of millions of women working across households, factories, offices, farms, and communities. Legal protections and everyday safeguards for women are essential. Justice must be available and effective for everyone. Additionally, initiatives must be continuous, inclusive, and aimed at creating real progress.

Bangladesh has demonstrated that empowering women can drive significant social and economic progress. The aim now is to build on this achievement by ensuring that women and girls of all backgrounds enjoy equal rights, access to justice, and adequate opportunities to influence the future of the country. The true fulfilment of IWD's promise depends on the full recognition of all women's rights, dignity, and voices.



VISUAL: ANWAR SOHEL

presence in electoral politics remains less than satisfactory. The recently held parliamentary election saw fewer women contesting for parliamentary seats than previous years. Although reserved seats ensure a minimum level of female representation in parliament, the number of women elected directly from general seats remains very low.

This underrepresentation is due to multiple factors. Economic barriers are particularly significant. Participating in elections requires considerable financial resources, and many women find it difficult to mobilise the funds necessary to run competitive campaigns. Political financing systems are often dominated by established male networks, which disadvantages women candidates.

Social and cultural norms play a vital role in shaping gender roles. Politics is

with higher female representation tend to prioritise social issues, including education, health, and community well-being. Women leaders introduce diverse viewpoints and experiences, which enrich policy debates and promote inclusive decision-making.

Political parties should actively nominate women candidates and support them throughout campaigns. Financial support mechanisms must be adapted to reduce economic barriers for women candidates. Furthermore, leadership training and mentorship programmes can help women take on political roles at the national level.

Women's participation in local government elections shows some promise. In the past, we have seen a number of women participating in the union parishad elections. Although

Why public service reform should be our next big leap



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When it comes to economic reforms, an ordinary moment when a citizen tries to access a public service and succeeds within minutes, instead of struggling for days navigating a maze, is no less significant than a successful megaproject or a new tax regime. Bangladesh has already had a glimpse of what a better future may look like. The concepts of Union Digital Centers (UDC), electronic filing system (e-Nothi), and electronic government procurement (e-GP) provide the foundation for redesigning state services around citizens. The next step is to make that experience universal, measurable, and accessible, bringing the idea of "government in your pocket" to life fully.

Imagine a single app through which a citizen can renew documents, apply for benefits, track applications, pay fees, book appointments, and file complaints—without middlemen or repeated visits to Dhaka. Singapore has moved in this direction with LifeSG, consolidating hundreds of services in a single app. India did something similar with UMANG, bringing multiple services onto one platform. By digitising services, these countries are rewriting the citizen-state relationship. Bangladesh can do the same to achieve a macroeconomic impact.

Public service reform often fails because governments measure the wrong things. They count portals and

the number of services going online. Whereas citizens measure how long it takes, how much it costs and how many visits it requires to avail a service. That is why the most powerful benchmarking idea in governance is disarmingly simple: TCV—time, cost, and visits. This is more than a monitoring tool; it is a philosophy. The state exists to reduce the transaction costs of life. If a service still requires multiple visits, long waits, and unpredictable "processing time," digitisation has only changed the shape of the queue.

As part of a broader reform effort to improve efficiency in the public service, the next step could be to make TCV an accountability standard across ministries—not a project concept limited to pilot reforms. Because, convenience aside, TCV also measures corruption risk. Every additional visit creates discretion; every "come tomorrow" acts as a silent tax on productivity. The countries that have made the biggest gains in public service are not always the richest, but those that understood a deeper principle: citizens should not have to carry information from one office to another.

Estonia is a global case study because it built interoperability through its X-Road platform. Agencies can securely exchange verified information instead of demanding repeated paper submissions. Estonia calculates the annual time saved by its digital services

in "working years," directly connecting e-government efficiency to economic output. Rwanda offers another lesson. Through Irembo, a national e-service portal, service delivery times fell dramatically when processes were simplified and made transparent.

A modern public service state needs a system where citizens can file complaints easily, track progress transparently, and see resolution timelines. India's CPGRAMS shows how a centralised grievance platform can be connected across ministries and monitored at scale. For Bangladesh, grievance redress will be an anti-corruption infrastructure. It reduces dependence on brokers and the helplessness that pushes people towards paying "speed money." And it creates a time-stamped, reviewable trail. If Bangladesh is to build citizen-friendly public services, grievance redress should be its backbone.

Artificial intelligence is important here. It compresses time, reduces paperwork friction, and shrinks discretion. At the consumer experience end, AI can provide 24/7 guidance—explaining eligibility, checking documents, estimating processing times, and thus reducing the information gap that fuels middlemen. Inside the government, AI can support faster triage and routing by classifying applications, flagging missing documents, detecting duplicates, and organising intelligent queues based on urgency and rules. This reduces delays and arbitrary decision points for the overworked government officials.

There is also a governance dividend. AI-driven analytics can detect anomalies in procurement and finance—unusual price movements, suspicious bidding clusters, or irregular timing. When designed properly, digitisation becomes an integrity system, not just a transaction system.

Public service innovation is often framed as convenience. That understates the real prize. When citizens spend fewer days chasing services, the economy gains labour hours. When businesses face predictable approvals, investment becomes less risky. In other words, public service reform is a competitiveness policy. Estonia's experience is instructive because it puts numbers behind digital productivity gains. Bangladesh should adopt that habit: quantify the savings in time and money for citizens and firms—and treat those savings as national achievements.

Economists like Daron Acemoglu, Simon Johnson, and James A. Robinson have all pushed a simple but powerful idea into the global mainstream: institutions matter. Prosperity does not emerge from geography or slogans. It grows where public systems are accountable, and where innovation is embedded in governance itself. Their work reminds us that public service innovation is not administrative tinkering; it is institutional reform in its most human form.

Bangladesh does not need a perfect super-app overnight. But it needs a clear, disciplined plan. Start with the services people use and struggle with most: tourism permits, local certificates, business licences, passport and immigration services, and social protection enrolment. Measure their TCV. Publish the baseline. Then commit publicly to reducing the time, cost and visits required.

Bangladesh's next big economic reform could be something quiet but more transformative: a state that fits in a citizen's pocket, respects their time, reduces their costs, and treats service as a right, not a favour. When government becomes predictable, transparent and accessible, citizens feel respected, and the economy moves faster. And that may be the most powerful reform of all.