

ACHIEVING EQUALITY BEFORE THE LAW IN BANGLADESH

An Assessment of the Law from a Gender Perspective



The Daily Star



A roundtable was organized on March 9, 2026, by UN Women in partnership with The Daily Star, with support from the European Union. The event marked the launch of a report providing a timely and comprehensive gender-based analysis of Bangladesh's legal framework, identifying gaps, highlighting discriminatory provisions, and proposing actionable recommendations. Here is a summary of that discussion.



GITANJALI SINGH
Representative
UN Women
Bangladesh

The UN Women report is a timely contribution to advancing gender equality and justice in Bangladesh. Despite the promise of equality enshrined in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, CEDAW and the Constitution of the People's Republic of Bangladesh, the reality for many women and girls remains starkly different. Across the most fundamental aspects of life – work and income, family and property, mobility, safety and security – women continue to face systemic disadvantage. Harmful social norms persist, reinforcing structural barriers to equal justice. There has been progress, and it deserves recognition. Discriminatory provisions in the Evidence (Amendment) Act 2022 have been repealed. Amendments to the Domestic Violence Act, 2010, are underway. Most recently, the Interim Government's approval of the Prevention of Sexual Harassment at Workplace and Educational Institutions Ordinance 2026 marks an important step forward – even as we await the formal enactment. A coordinated, whole-of-society approach is essential to translate legal reforms into real change for women in Bangladesh. As we mark International Women's Day and the 70th session of the Commission on the Status of Women (CSW), we are reminded that equality requires more than commitments; it requires enforcement, accountability, and transformation.



ENRICO LORENZON
First Secretary
Head of Inclusive
Governance

Delegation of the European Union to Bangladesh
Equality before the law remains a fundamental principle essential to human dignity, democratic governance, and sustainable development. In Bangladesh, this principle is embedded in the Constitution and reinforced through international commitments such as The Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) and the Sustainable Development Goals. Yet legal guarantees must translate into real and accessible justice. A right recognised in law must also be real in practice. It must be accessible, enforceable, and enjoyed equally by all. The UN Women report offers an evidence-based assessment of 32 laws affecting women's rights across family relations, employment, property, citizenship, and protection from gender-based violence. It identifies 19 laws requiring amendment, highlights outdated provisions, and recommends new measures on sexual harassment prevention, anti-discrimination, and post-divorce maintenance. It also stresses that legislation alone



based violence, labour rights, and family laws. Significant legal gaps are identified, alongside detailed reform proposals. Recommendations include reforming the definition of rape, criminalising the rape of child brides, modernising colonial-era language in sexual offence laws, and introducing explicit provisions on sexual harassment. The study also highlights the need to strengthen procedural protections, particularly for persons with disabilities within the justice system. In labour law, proposed reforms include comprehensive sexual harassment legislation, improved maternity protection, and greater inclusion of the informal sector. Family law reforms address child marriage, post-divorce maintenance, inheritance rights, guardianship, and adoption, while urging gender-neutral marriage registration. The study further calls for reviewing discriminatory provisions in citizenship, trust, and abortion laws, alongside adopting a comprehensive anti-discrimination framework.



SARA HOSSAIN
Honorary Executive
Director
BLAST

The proposal to repeal the Guardians and Wards Act entirely could create serious challenges if no clear replacement is planned. Even an imperfect law allows for progressive interpretation and practical remedies, and focus should be on improving existing codified laws rather than pursuing ambitious but currently unachievable goals like a uniform family code. Recent controversies over second marriages show the need for awareness of legal provisions, as even highly educated individuals misunderstand them. Divorce and maintenance laws remain discriminatory, varying by religion, and reforms pending for decades have yet to be implemented. The Special Marriage Act also requires an amendment to protect religious rights. Maintenance cases, often involving small amounts, need expedited resolution. Effective remedies require awareness, education, and stronger collaboration between courts, alternative dispute mechanisms, and community organisations. Existing laws offer opportunities that must be fully utilised.



MUHAMMAD AMIRUL HAQ TUHIN
Advocate,
Supreme Court of
Bangladesh

The Domestic Violence (Prevention and Protection) Act is a progressive legislation, yet awareness and practical application remain limited across Bangladesh. In Dhaka, more lawyers are beginning to utilise its provisions, with encouraging cases emerging outside the capital. Remedies under the law include protection orders, compensation, residence, and custody orders. Challenges arise in proving the existence of a family relationship, especially when divorce claims are disputed or improperly documented, limiting access to remedies. Courts show inconsistent recognition of mental and psychological violence, and appellate processes often slow justice, reducing the effectiveness of orders. Low penalties for violations further weaken enforcement, while provisions penalising "unnecessary" claims remain unclear. Broader dissemination and practical guidance are needed to make the law more accessible. Amendments to clarify eligibility, strengthen remedies, and eliminate discriminatory gaps, such as in adultery provisions and post-divorce rights, are essential to ensure meaningful protection for women and children under this Act.



SHARMIN SULTANA MOUSHUMI
Advocate,
Labour Court Bar
Association

The workers from remote areas face unique challenges that existing labour laws often fail to address. Bangladesh's labour legislation primarily covers the formal sector, leaving a vast number of informal workers without legal protection, creating a significant gap. EPZ workers face further restrictions, with limited trade union rights that confine them within rigid frameworks. Maternity leave remains inadequate, with government employees receiving six months while many labourers endure only four months. Sexual harassment complaints in RMG factories frequently go unreported due to social pressures and family constraints, while counselling and support services remain minimal. Legal requirements such as childcare facilities are poorly enforced, often existing only to meet compliance standards rather than genuinely supporting workers. Ensuring a safe, non-discriminatory, and dignified work environment requires practical enforcement of laws, coordination among labour administration, employers, trade unions, civil society, and legal actors, and increasing awareness so that women workers can exercise their rights effectively.



MASUDA REHANA BEGUM
Joint General
Secretary
Bangladesh Mohila
Parishad

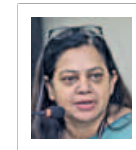
A Uniform Family Code is urgently needed to advance women's rights, strengthen society, and fulfil both national and international commitments. The current system links marriage, birth, and death registrations to religious prescriptions, creating inequality and fragmentation. A Uniform Family Code would transcend religion, allowing all citizens—Hindus, Muslims, Buddhists, and Christians to marry under the same legal framework, with unified registration of key life events. Maintenance provisions would ensure that either spouse, regardless of gender, can provide support when able, promoting fairness within families. Optional implementation may ease transition, yet the Code addresses structural inequalities and reduces family breakdowns. Achieving such a framework is essential for progressing into the twenty-first century, aligning with social and SDG goals, and creating a society where people are recognised first as human beings, not divided by gender, religion, or custom.



DR UMME SARABAN TAHURA
Deputy Secretary,
Law and Justice Division
Ministry of Law

Under the Legal Aid Act, legal aid is entirely free for persons with disabilities, regardless of income. While general applicants may face income limits, no such restriction applies to persons with disabilities, ensuring broader access to justice. Regarding mediation, recent amendments clarify that some cases require mediation before proceeding, while others—such as domestic violence cases—are exempt. Legal Aid Offices are increasingly functioning as expanded mediation centres, with dedicated spaces for women. Pilot programmes in ten districts have demonstrated very high success rates, particularly where mediation is conducted under judicial oversight, encouraging constructive engagement between parties. This process also helps reduce the burden on courts and expedites dispute resolution. However, significant challenges remain in the implementation of existing laws,

contributing to low conviction rates. Social factors, party engagement, and evidentiary gaps continue to affect accountability and justice delivery.



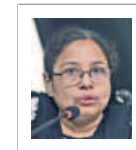
HUMAIRA AZIZ
Gender Programme
Specialist,
UNICEF

UN agencies play a critical role in supporting governments to address gender-based violence affecting women and girls. Through surveys such as UNFPA's Violence Against Women Survey and UNICEF's MICS, broader trends become visible, helping identify progress, gaps, and underlying causes. Such data allow the UN to support governments in understanding issues at a macro level. Another important role lies in providing technical assistance to translate international treaties and standards into practical, country-specific actions through collaboration with governments and civil society. The UN also creates convening spaces to discuss emerging challenges, including technologically facilitated gender-based violence. System strengthening remains central, particularly in improving justice systems and law enforcement to become more women-friendly and gender-responsive. Failure to ensure justice for women carries economic costs, as child marriage and domestic violence limit women's participation in the formal economy. Urgent attention is needed on child marriage laws, inheritance inequality for daughters, and legal protection for vulnerable girls aged 15-19, ensuring justice that empowers autonomy rather than offering remedies alone.



DR. TANIA HAQUE
Professor,
Department of
Women and Gender
Studies
University of Dhaka

The Constitution of Bangladesh guarantees equality before the law. Yet this homogeneous understanding of equality often overlooks the diverse and unequal realities of citizens. Justice requires more than the existence of laws; it requires recognising differences and addressing structural inequalities. Two critical questions arise: which laws remain gender blind, and why many existing laws continue to be underused or ineffective. In a deeply patriarchal society, social norms frequently override formal legal frameworks. Ensuring equality within difference, therefore, requires an intersectional lens that considers class, religion, social bias, and context. Political will also plays a decisive role, as justice mechanisms can be shaped or influenced by political actors. Several overlooked issues demand attention, including language violence, extramarital relationships, unpaid care work, and the gendered implications of daycare provisions under the Labour Act 2006. Complex legal language and lengthy procedures further limit accessibility. Strengthening justice, therefore, requires both legal reform and a more inclusive, intersectional approach to implementation.



SALMA MAHBUB
General Secretary
Bangladesh Society
for the Change and
Advocacy Nexus
(B-SCAN)

It is concerning that the issue of disability was overlooked in discussions on discrimination. Promoting judicial awareness and access to legal processes among persons with disabilities remains essential. Women with disabilities experience multiple layers of deprivation and often remain excluded from legal protection. Violence against them frequently occurs within families or among close community members, while

influential actors may discourage them from seeking justice. Although persons with disabilities were mentioned in parts of the discussion, the recommendations did not adequately address their needs. Access to justice also requires supportive infrastructure, accessible information, and institutional assistance, which are often absent in courts. Repeated legal procedures create further barriers, particularly for those at the grassroots level. Government support, including financial assistance, would help address these challenges. Current legislation, including the Disability Rights and Protection Act, fails to explicitly recognise women and girls with disabilities, highlighting the need for reforms that acknowledge their specific vulnerabilities and rights.



SEEMA ZAHUR
Vice President
Bangladesh National
Women Lawyers'
Association (BNWLA)

Community legal aid clinics have long supported women and children, particularly in remote areas, offering accessible spaces where disputes can often be resolved through discussion and mediation. The Legal Aid Act 2025, however, changes who can provide legal aid, raising concerns about the role of clinics and trained paralegals where lawyers' associations are absent. Many women seek mediation to preserve family relationships, yet direct referral to courts under the Domestic Violence Act can accelerate divorce. Emergencies, such as shelter at night, are complicated by requirements for written documentation and court orders. The absence of mediation in the Domestic Violence Prevention Act further hinders resolution. Clinics also assist trafficking victims and migrant workers, highlighting their broader role. Complex divorce procedures, harmful legal language, and limited recognition of third gender needs reveal persistent gaps, emphasising the need for careful reform and proper implementation of legal aid services.



TANJIM FERDOUS
Head of Strategic
Partnerships
The Daily Star
(Moderator of the
Session)

The principle of equality before the law is fundamental, yet its implementation in Bangladesh requires ongoing review and reform. Existing laws show gaps and discriminatory provisions, particularly affecting women's rights. Strengthening protections against gender-based violence, reforming family, marriage, and inheritance laws, and ensuring workplace rights and maternity protections remain urgent priorities. Legal reform must be accompanied by effective implementation, awareness, and accountability to transform laws into lived realities. This roundtable provided space to reflect, discuss, and commit to action, ensuring that equality before the law becomes a tangible reality for every woman and girl in Bangladesh.

ATM MORSHED,
Lead at Legal Aid and Policy
Advocacy at BRAC;

LAILA JASMIN BANU,
Programme Manager, Delegation of
EU to Bangladesh;

ASMA RUBA,
Project Coordinator at Ain o Salish
Kendra;

RUHI NAZ,
Deputy Director of Research
Initiatives Bangladesh;

FOUZIA KHANDAKER,
Executive Director, Pragrosbor,
also spoke at the event.

RECOMMENDATIONS

- ▶▶ Reform family, marriage, and inheritance laws to ensure equality for all women across religious communities.
- ▶▶ Strengthen protections against gender-based violence, including revising rape definitions and criminalising abuse in child marriages.
- ▶▶ Introduce and enforce workplace protections, maternity rights, and inclusion for informal and hazardous sector women workers.
- ▶▶ Ensure legal aid is accessible to persons with disabilities, with adequate infrastructure, information, and financial support.
- ▶▶ Expand mediation services in legal processes to reduce court burdens and preserve family relationships.
- ▶▶ Apply an intersectional lens in law and justice to address structural inequalities and barriers faced by women and girls.
- ▶▶ Promote awareness, accountability, and effective implementation to turn laws into lived realities.

is insufficient; effective institutions, enforcement, and accountability are equally critical. Despite persistent barriers such as discriminatory provisions, weak enforcement, and gender bias, recent international commitments by Bangladesh create an important opportunity for reform and inclusive progress.



DR. TASLIMA YASMIN
Associate Professor,
Department of Law,
University of Dhaka

The report presents a comprehensive review of Bangladesh's legal framework affecting women's rights. The study examines key thematic areas, including gender-