

Where can women find safety?

Persistent intimate partner violence demands stronger action by govt

It is deeply concerning that Bangladesh's women continue to remain among those worst affected by intimate partner violence. According to an analysis of global and national data, Bangladesh ranks 11th globally in the prevalence of physical and/or sexual violence against women by intimate partners; and second only to Afghanistan in South Asia. Nearly one in two women in the country have experienced such violence, according to recent World Health Organization data. Findings from the latest Violence Against Women Survey by the Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics (BBS) present an equally disturbing picture: 70 percent of women and girls aged 15 and above reported experiencing at least one form of intimate partner violence in their lifetime. These findings point to a widespread crisis that requires urgent state action.

Despite increasing public discussion on women's rights and preventing violence against women, the situation on the ground has remained largely unchanged. According to a recent report by *Prothom Alo*, survivors reporting abuse by their husbands made an average of 51 calls a day, the highest in the past eight years. Also, a comparison of three national surveys by BBS conducted in 2011, 2015, and 2024 shows that violence by intimate partners remains far more common than violence by non-partners, pointing to deeply rooted problems within families and our social structure. According to experts, intimate partner violence not only inflicts physical and psychological harm on women but also affects children's wellbeing, perpetuating cycles of trauma and inequality across generations. Children growing up in violent households often carry emotional scars that shape their future relationships and behaviour.

The silence surrounding such abuse is also alarming. According to the latest BBS survey, 64 percent of survivors did not tell anyone about their experience, while only 7.4 percent sought legal action. The survey also found that domestic violence is more common in disaster-prone areas, which require particular attention from policymakers. Fear of social stigma, financial dependence, family pressure, and a lack of confidence in support systems continue to prevent many women from seeking help. Discriminatory family laws, unequal access to resources, deeply rooted gender norms, and controlling behaviour continue to create conditions in which such violence persists. This situation must change once and for all.

We urge the government to strengthen the enforcement of existing laws and address legal and institutional gaps that leave women vulnerable within their own families. Deeply rooted social attitudes and gender norms that normalise or justify abuse in relationships must be challenged through education and community engagement. Support services for survivors, including legal aid, shelters, counselling, and reporting mechanisms must become more accessible and effective. Violence within families cannot continue to be treated as a private matter. The state must ensure that women can live safely and with dignity in public and in their own homes.

Govt must protect Sufi shrines

Attack on Hazrat Shah Ali shrine is symptomatic of religious intimidation

The violent attack on the shrine of Hazrat Shah Ali Baghdadi (RA) in Dhaka's Mirpur on Thursday night was not an isolated act of hooliganism. It was another episode in a growing pattern of religious intimidation that is steadily eroding Bangladesh's pluralist heritage.

As they do every week, devotees had gathered at one of the capital's oldest Sufi shrines for prayers and spiritual observance. What followed was an hour of chaos and brutality. Worshipers were beaten, property vandalised, and panic spread through the shrine compound. Among the victims was a woman carrying her two-month-old child, who was reportedly struck multiple times while trying to shield her infant. Disturbingly, all this unfolded within metres of parked police vehicles, raising troubling questions about the role and responsiveness of law enforcement. The immediate details are alarming enough. Witnesses, local shopkeepers and even police insiders identified the attackers as activists linked to Bangladesh Jamaat-e-Islami and its student wing, Islami Chhatra Shibir. The local Jamaat lawmaker denied the allegation, claiming police had been conducting an anti-narcotics drive. Yet senior officers from the Dhaka Metropolitan Police directly contradicted that account.

More worrying, however, is the broader pattern this attack reflects. According to research by Maqam: Center for Sufi Heritage, at least 97 shrines across Bangladesh were attacked between August 2024 and the end of last year. Those attacks left three people dead and about 468 injured. This is not random unrest. It points to an increasingly emboldened hostility towards the Sufi tradition, one of the most enduring strands of Bangladesh's religious and cultural life. For generations, Sufi shrines have attracted people across class and social divides. Attacks on these shrines are therefore attacks on the country's social fabric itself.

The state's response so far has been deeply inadequate. Police reportedly had not received a formal complaint, even a full day after the assault in the Hazrat Shah Ali shrine, despite the violence occurring in public and in front of numerous witnesses. Authorities should not wait for the victims to file complaints before responding to a mob attack. The government has both the authority and the obligation to act proactively. Bangladesh's founding ideals are rooted in pluralism and tolerance. That inheritance must be protected.

THIS DAY IN HISTORY

WHO reclassifies homosexuality

On this day in 1990, the general assembly of the World Health Organization (WHO) removed homosexuality from its psychiatric classification of diseases. This historic milestone is commemorated globally as the International Day Against Homophobia, Transphobia, and Biphobia.

To move up global value chains, we must bolster our industries



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Bangladesh's participation in global value chains remains narrow and concentrated in low-value segments. As the "Global Value Chains and Inclusive Development: Asian Development Policy Report," published earlier this month, notes, the country's garment-led model has delivered jobs, exports, and confidence. Yet the present form of participation may not be enough to sustain productivity growth, better jobs, technological learning, and export resilience. Bangladesh's export story is still defined by millions of workers, mostly women, producing garments for global markets; a powerful achievement that now faces structural limits. The country is deeply embedded in the apparel chain but largely in its lowest-value stages; that is, cutting, making, trimming, and shipping. Much of the value is created elsewhere: in fibre development, design, branding, logistics, and retail intelligence. Bangladesh participates, but it does not yet exercise much influence over how the chain is organised.

The foundations of Bangladesh's competitiveness, i.e., low wages, scale, and preferential access, are eroding. Wages have risen, preference margins will shrink after LDC graduation, while competitors such as Vietnam, India, Cambodia, and Indonesia are moving quickly. Buyers now demand shorter lead times, traceability, environmental compliance, smaller batches, and flexibility. The old formula of low-cost, high-volume production will not drive the next stage of transformation. This does not imply a push to move away from garments. RMG remains Bangladesh's strongest industrial platform, with firms, workers, compliance systems, and global buyer relationships built over decades. The challenge is to use this base to move into higher-value activities while laying the foundations for a more diversified industrial economy.

Upgrading within garments must begin with textiles and inputs. Bangladesh still imports most woven fabrics, human-made fibres, chemicals, dyes, and machinery. Knitwear has stronger backward linkages, but woven garments remain dependent on imported fabric, which lengthens lead times, reduces flexibility, and weakens bargaining power. Competing

in higher-value apparel requires capabilities in fabric development, synthetic and blended fibres, technical textiles, design services, and modern dyeing and finishing. Environmental management for cleaner energy, water efficiency, and effluent treatment must be integral to this upgrading. Product sophistication is another frontier. Bangladesh excels in producing basic T-shirts, trousers, and sweaters, but there is a rising global demand for



Bangladesh is limited to the lowest-value stages of the apparel chain, such as cutting, making, trimming, and shipping.

FILE PHOTO: ANISUR RAHMAN

sportswear, outerwear, uniforms, medical textiles, recycled fibre-based clothing, and smaller fashion batches. These require skilled technicians, digital production planning, design capacity, quality assurance, and closer buyer communication. Firms must evolve from order-takers to problem-solvers.

The constraints are also institutional. Bangladesh lacks a dense ecosystem linking factories, engineers, designers, testing labs, logistics firms, universities, and regulators. Training is detached from industry needs, while research and development is still viewed as a luxury. Many factories operate efficiently inside their gates but face weak support outside: congested ports, uncertain customs, fragmented regulation, and high trade costs. Besides, diversification beyond garments is now essential. Bangladesh has long discussed it, but progress has

been limited. The issue is not a lack of potential, as pharmaceuticals, agro-processing, leather goods, footwear, light engineering, ceramics, electronics assembly, shipbuilding niches, digital services, and renewable energy components all offer opportunities. The deeper problem is that the policy regime has not supported these sectors as consistently as it has RMG. While garments benefit from bonded warehouses, duty-free inputs, and predictable export procedures, other sectors face higher input costs, weaker logistics, limited testing capacity, and more complex regulations. This uneven landscape makes it difficult for non-RMG exporters to compete internationally.

Bangladesh, therefore, needs a broad-based industrial policy, not narrow incentives for a few sectors. A comprehensive strategy to build capabilities across the economy

The 'cooling-off period' requirement is a barrier to women's political participation



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In Bangladesh, the transition from a government job to a political career is not as straightforward as it ought to be. Under Section 12(1)(f) of the Representation of the People Order, 1972, government officials are eligible to contest parliamentary elections only after a period of three years—commonly known as a cooling-off period—has passed since their resignation or retirement from office. This provision is based on valid concerns, but its broad implementation raises significant issues regarding inclusivity and the future of political engagement, particularly for women.

The purpose of the cooling-off period is to deter people from using their positions, power, or privileged knowledge for gaining political advantage, and thus preventing perceived political patronage, misappropriation of public resources, and conflicts of interest. Additionally, it prevents former public employees from exploiting their previous positions for personal or political gain, especially by moving directly into a political role where they might receive disproportionate benefits. The concept of separation of powers and public trust could be undermined if civil servants were free to transition into political positions. As a result, the cooling-off period serves as a deterrent, strengthening accountability and

safeguarding institutional integrity.

Although the provision's intent is sound, its application might be sweeping and too basic. Not every public employee holds a position with substantial decision-making or executive power, access to confidential data, or the potential to influence political outcomes. For example, a government officer in grade 10, 11, or 12 might not be as influential as executives at the directorial level, especially if they held no administrative or policymaking responsibilities. These variations are not taken into consideration when the same three-year restriction is applied consistently to all levels of public service.

This becomes particularly problematic when viewed through the lens of gender and political participation. Bangladesh has made notable strides in enhancing women's representation in parliament through reserved seats. However, women are already substantially marginalised by the system for these seats, where candidates are chosen by MPs rather than through direct constituency-based elections. Since reserved-seat MPs do not have a direct electoral mandate, they are frequently seen as secondary representatives.

In such a scenario, the cooling-off period for women aspiring to move from public service to politics could further impede their already limited

possibilities. It may prevent a capable, seasoned woman with years of public service from making a significant contribution to national politics. In the political landscape that increasingly demands youth involvement and new viewpoints, this delay can be especially disheartening.

Other democracies also have a cooling-off period, but their design is far more calibrated than Bangladesh's current framework. India does not have a blanket prohibition on government officers contesting elections after departing from public service; instead, the All India Services (Conduct) Rules impose restrictions on senior-level officers rather than the entire bureaucracy, and concentrate mostly on post-retirement commercial employment.

Under the UK's Advisory Committee on Business Appointments, cooling-off periods, which typically last between three months and two years, are primarily applicable to senior officials, such as ministers and permanent secretaries.

In the US, laws like the Ethics in Government Act of 1978 limit lobbying and post-office influence but do not establish a permanent barrier to participation in elections, shifting the regulatory focus away from candidacy and toward ethical conduct. Under Canada's Conflict of Interest Act, ministers and other high-ranking officials are subject to more stringent post-employment restrictions, while lower-level public employees face fewer obstacles. Individuals must resign before contesting elections, but no universal waiting period exists. Australia, too, does not impose a uniform prohibition on government employees contesting elections; instead, it relies on flexible, case-by-case guidelines.

are another missing link. Unlike East and Southeast Asia, South Asia has not developed strong cross-border production sharing due to political mistrust, high tariffs, weak transport links, and cumbersome borders. Bangladesh could benefit from deeper ties with countries in South Asia, ASEAN, Japan, Korea, and China, not through uncritical openness but via strategic integration. Better regional links would allow firms to access specialised inputs, technologies, and markets, as well as enable SMEs to participate in supply chains they cannot reach alone.

Moving up value chains is also a labour challenge. The first generation of export success relied on low-skilled labour. The next phase requires skills in machine maintenance, quality control, digital inventory, industrial engineering, compliance documentation, merchandising, and production analytics. Supervisors and mid-level managers will be crucial. Policies must ensure that automation and upgrading do not displace workers without support. Technical and vocational education must be redesigned with industry input but not captured by narrow employer interests. Women workers must be supported to move into higher-skilled roles rather than being pushed out of the sector they helped build.

Sustainability pressures are rising. EU due diligence rules, carbon reporting, waste management, and circular fashion commitments will shape export prospects. While some factories have invested in green buildings, compliance must extend across dyeing, washing, packaging, transport, and recycling. Industrial policy must be linked to discipline: support tied to learning, productivity, environmental compliance, employment quality, and export performance, with incentives reviewed and withdrawn when ineffective. LDC graduation also adds urgency. Bangladesh must compete more on productivity, reliability, quality, and institutional credibility. The coming years should focus on trade negotiation capacity, customs and tariff reform, stronger standards institutions, expanded export finance, better industrial land management, and FDI that brings technology and market access rather than low-cost assembly.

Bangladesh has already proven that it can enter the world market. The harder task now is to move from assembly to capability, from preference dependence to competitiveness, and from one-sector dominance to a broader industrial base. The garment worker on the sewing line remains part of this future, but she should not remain at the same point in the chain, and neither should Bangladesh.

In other words, these jurisdictions, instead of implementing sweeping restrictions, have specific protections in place to deal with conflicts of interest, access to privileged information, and proximity to executive authority. The fundamental idea is proportionality: lower- and mid-level officials are not needlessly barred from participating in politics or elections while those with more institutional influence are subject to more stringent restrictions.

In comparison, Bangladesh's three-year blanket cooling-off period seems undifferentiated and generalised. The current framework prioritises formal uniformity over substantive fairness by treating all government service holders as posing equal risk, regardless of rank, function, or exposure to sensitive decision-making. This not only calls into question whether the restriction is reasonable, but also undermines broader policy goals, such as promoting political participation of capable and professional women.

Besides, women, particularly those in mid-level public service, who seek to leverage reserved seats to enter politics, may be disproportionately burdened by the cooling-off period requirement. These women often lack large political networks or influence, unlike executive officers. The cooling-off period, therefore, becomes not just a regulatory measure but yet another barrier to entry. Therefore, such provisions should be revisited from a more nuanced standpoint. Encouraging women's participation in politics is crucial to address the diverse needs and experiences of people, rather than merely for representation. A more just and dynamic political environment can be achieved by eliminating or changing needless obstacles while preserving necessary protection.