The Daily Star
FOUNDER EDITOR: **LATE S. M. ALI**

Children's safety must be a priority

Justice must be delivered in all child rape and murder cases

As the nation witnesses an alarming rise in rape, murder and all forms of violent crimes against children, it has become imperative to understand what is driving this rise and how, as a society, we can prevent them once and for all. This month alone, a series of gruesome crimes against children have been reported across Bangladesh. The more recent among them was the horrific rape and decapitation of an eight-year-old child by neighbours in Pallabi, Dhaka. Just days earlier, a four-year-old was allegedly raped and killed by a neighbour in Sylhet. As of this writing, this daily reported the attempted rape of a seven-year-old girl in Savar by a 69-year-old man. Earlier this month, a madrasa teacher in Netrakona allegedly raped an 11-year-old student, resulting in her pregnancy. Such incidents expose the grim reality our children face on a regular basis, with danger lurking almost everywhere.

Analysing news reports from 2025, child rights organisation Shishurai Shob found that nine out of 10 child predators were known to their victims. Immediate neighbours accounted for 40.58 percent of the 308 documented rape cases, followed by acquaintances, teachers or religious instructors, and close relatives, while strangers represented less than 10 percent. Alarmingly, more than 59 percent of sexual abuse cases and 66 percent of documented child murders occurred within homes or family environments—places that are supposed to be the safest for children. ASK data for January-April this year shows that children aged 12 years or below accounted for most rape and murder victims. And disturbingly, in around 10 percent of child rape cases, victims were later killed in an attempt to destroy evidence.

Criminologists note that perpetrators often target children because they are easier to manipulate and less able to communicate abuse. Sociologists have also warned that patriarchal attitudes, objectification of women and children, and spread of exploitative online content have normalised harmful behaviours and reinforced power-based violence. Economic stress and wider social frustrations may further intensify these tendencies, with children becoming the easiest targets. But perhaps the most disturbing factor is the failure of institutions entrusted with delivering justice. Of the 124 child murders documented by Shishurai Shob, only 35 resulted in formal charges and just two ended in convictions. The state must answer for such grave failures.

The government can no longer respond to child rape and murder cases with fragmented, incident-driven reactions. It must ensure justice in every case and treat protection of children as an urgent national priority. At the same time, while public outrage in this situation is understandable, people must not take law into their own hands under any circumstances. Authorities must ensure prompt police action, child-sensitive investigations, stronger forensic capacity, and swift but fair trials that lead to meaningful convictions. Establishing an independent National Child Commission, as proposed by experts, should also be seriously considered. Families, schools, communities, and institutions all have roles to play, but ultimately the state bears the greatest responsibility. Our children cannot continue to pay the price for institutional failures and social indifference.

Address the rot in our infrastructure sector

Will development always remain shrouded in corruption?

Development in Bangladesh's infrastructure is often treated as the opportunity for various government and non-government entities to extract as much money for themselves as possible. A recent report by *Prothom Alo* sheds light on one such instance, where the web of corruption is so complex and spun so widely that one has to marvel at the audacity of those involved. The report narrates how funding acquired to upgrade a 190km highway from Elenga in Tangail to Rangpur into four lanes has also been used to construct various extravagant structures. Shockingly, these ventures are being constructed in the area in Dhaka's Paikpara, around the Road Research Laboratory premises, which is not even remotely close to the project area.

Approved in 2016 under the Roads and Highways Department (RHD) and financed by a loan of more than Tk 11,000 crore from ADB, the project, titled SASEC Road Connectivity Project-2, is divided into 11 packages, nine of which are directly concerned with road and highway development. The aforementioned lavish structures are being built under the remaining two packages, contracted to one National Development Engineers (NDE), who initially acquired the work by bidding a cost that was 13.5 percent less than the RHD's official estimate. However, over the following years, artificially underpriced components were dropped, and more expensive components were added, inflating the project cost by as much as 45 percent.

Not only has the construction of buildings in Paikpara incurred unnecessary costs, but it has also affected the surrounding environment and culture. One of three lakes on the laboratory premises has already been filled up, while around 1,000 trees have been felled. Additionally, buildings designed by the legendary architect Mazharul Islam have been demolished, despite a 2020 letter from the Institute of Architects Bangladesh to then Road Transport and Bridges Minister Obaidul Quader, pleading for their preservation.

It is difficult to believe that irregularities such as inflated costs, environmental degradation, and unending deadline extensions occur without political favouritism for certain contractors. NDE is no different. But given that it was backed by the fallen Awami League regime, why did the NDE still receive an extension for another two years, which pushed the project cost to Tk 19,056 crore? We urge the current authorities to investigate the damning irregularities found in this project. A lot of public trust has been eroded over the years due to such massive levels of corruption in development projects. It is crucial that the current government works to recover this trust and prevents it from eroding further by ensuring accountability in infrastructure development.

The economics behind our education choices

BLOWIN' IN THE WIND

Dr Shamsad Mortuza
is vice-chancellor at the University of Liberal Arts Bangladesh (ULAB).

SHAMSAD MORTUZA

I am sitting in a hotel room in Islamabad, reading a recent *Bonik Barta* report that makes a compelling argument: that madrasa education has become the affordable architecture of hope for many families as public schooling keeps losing trust and private schooling remains expensive. We have already visited over 10 universities in Pakistan as part of a high-profile delegation. In each institution, we have noticed how faith is respected without compromising the future. The technological, entrepreneurial and future-orientated higher education landscape we witnessed cannot be attained without orienting the primary and secondary supply chains towards future readiness.

Discourses on madrasa education adhere to the binary of modern versus religious, secularism versus spirituality, and the Western model of schooling versus traditional madrasa. But what is amiss is not the theological component but its economic factors. The binary pivots on affordability. The educational choice of students is made by families, as they probably find it cheaper to enrol their children in affordable, often charitable institutions, with the hope that such a decision will pay off in the afterlife.

Madrasa education, however, is not one single story. Alia madrasas are attracting students because their curriculum now appears closer to general education, while Qawmi madrasas are drawing many poor families in because they are cheaper and, often, provide food, boarding, discipline, and supervision. Another *Bonik Barta* report from 2024 notes that Alia madrasa enrolment reached the highest in two decades, rising to around 40.2 lakh in 2022 from around 38.06 lakh in 2019. During the same time, the Qawmi madrasa board recorded an increase of nearly 100,000 students.

The spirit of non-discrimination with which political changes were welcomed nearly two years ago is dampened by an educational market trend that is sorting children by class. For one group of parents, Alia madrasas offer a hybrid promise: the same or similar textbooks as schools, with additional religious instruction. For another group, Qawmi madrasas offer something even more basic: a place where a child can be fed, housed, watched, and educated at a cost the family can bear. The report's most telling anecdote is that of a working mother who sends her child to a nearby madrasa because she leaves home in the morning, returns in the evening, and has no one to look after him. The madrasa becomes a school plus daycare with food for both body and soul.

VISUAL: **ALIZA RAHMAN**

This anecdote involving the mother should make the state ask why education choice is tied to a survival decision. At the same time, the authorities must try to discern why government primary schools are losing confidence. The Annual Primary School Census 2023 data reported by *The Daily Star* shows that total primary-level enrolment fell from around 2.05 crore students in 2022 to about 1.97 crore in 2023. Government primary schools alone lost more than 10 lakh students. During the same period, kindergarten enrolment increased from about 46 lakh to around 48.7 lakh. Educationists cited financial hardship and movement to Qawmi madrasas as among the reasons for the fall.

The architecture of disparity is obvious: children from the upper middle class enter English medium schools, while children from the aspirational middle class enter private kindergartens. Children from lower middle class or poor background go wherever the fee is manageable and the food is available. These are class destinies that we pretend to overlook.

The argument is not against madrasa education. Bangladesh's religious learning traditions are deep, and many madrasa students have gone on to universities, professional fields, and public life. The Alia madrasa authorities have updated the curricula to have computer labs, science labs, and pathways to higher education at home and abroad. If a madrasa student learns Bangla, English, mathematics, science, Arabic, ethics, digital literacy, communication, financial literacy, and civic responsibility, society gains a rooted and capable citizen. The issue here is not faith, but unequal futures.

We should not encourage any system—whether it is a madrasa, government school or a private English medium institution—that promotes memorisation without comprehension, devotion without employability, modernity without ethics, or certificates without competence. Our access to and spread of education is lauded by Unesco. Its 2026 report notes that primary completion increased from 34 percent in 1990 to 90 percent in 2024, while lower-secondary completion rose from 23 percent to 74 percent. But completion is not the true measure of learning or job readiness.

The neat data is dented by NEET (Not in Education, Employment or Training) findings of the World Bank, which show 27 percent of Bangladeshi youth (around 1.26 crore people) in an oblivion. Of them, 90 percent are female and are mostly from rural areas. While we keep chanting "demographic dividend" as a development mantra, millions of our youth remain undereducated, undertrained, and underemployed. And the much-vaunted demographic window is likely to narrow around 2040. That means the child entering school today will come of age just as the window begins to close. A demographic dividend without skills is not a dividend but a liability.

The reform we need must therefore begin with one principle: every child in Bangladesh, regardless of stream, must receive a guaranteed foundation of learning. The stream may differ; the entitlement cannot. A child in a Qawmi madrasa, Alia madrasa, government primary school, NGO school, kindergarten, English version school, or English medium school must have access to literacy, numeracy, science, digital skills, communication, health awareness, civic ethics, and pathways to future work. Such access requires courage from the state. Government primary schools must be rescued from the stigma of last resort. That will require teacher accountability, continuous professional development, school meals, safe classrooms, active parent engagement, digital learning support, and honest assessment of learning outcomes.

It also requires humility from policymakers. Madrasa modernisation should not be pursued as cultural correction but as educational justice. Madrasa students don't need condescension. They need modern amenities and bridges to technical and higher education. The gap between different streams must be narrowed. Private institutions must be brought into a rational accountability framework. The state cannot regulate the poor and pamper the rich. The Pakistan visit reminds me that higher education reform cannot begin at the university gate. By then, too many inequalities have already hardened. Upskilling and reskilling must become national habits, but they must rest on a school system that does not abandon children at the beginning.

The madrasa question is not about religion and curriculum alone. It's also about the price of schooling, the collapse of public trust, the hidden cost of private aspiration, and the social sorting of childhood. When education becomes too expensive for the poor and too unequal for the nation, madrasa growth becomes not an aberration but a symptom.

INTERNATIONAL DAY TO END OBSTETRIC FISTULA

A fistula-free Bangladesh is within reach

Catherine Breen Kamkong
is UNFPA representative in Bangladesh.

CATHERINE BREEN KAMKONG

Every woman has the right not only to survive childbirth, but also to live with dignity thereafter. Yet, for thousands of women in Bangladesh, childbirth marks the beginning of profound loss, pain and isolation. Obstetric fistula is one of the most devastating childbirth injuries. It usually results from a lack of quality and timely care during labour and birth, and continues to rob women of their health, dignity, and place in society. Most women lose their children during a very difficult and prolonged labour and then suffer alone for years, leaking urine or stool continuously, abandoned by families, excluded from communities, and forgotten by the health system. This year, on the International Day to End Obstetric Fistula, the global theme is "Her health is a right: invest in ending fistula and childbirth injuries."

The country has committed to ending obstetric fistula by 2030. According to the most recent national estimates, around 20,000 women aged 15-64 years are living with obstetric fistula in Bangladesh. With less than four years remaining, the nationwide collective effort to find and treat every woman living with an obstetric fistula and to address the root causes is more urgent than ever.

Bangladesh joined the global Campaign to End Fistula in 2003, and since then, the country has made steady progress. Today, the country has 35 Fistula Corners in public hospitals and more than 20 designated repair centres nationwide. According to the national fistula annual report, between 2019 and 2025, Bangladesh repaired more than 3,500 genital fistula cases, with surgical success rates exceeding 90 percent.

A terrifying new trend is another form of obstetric fistula, known as iatrogenic fistula, caused by poor-quality surgical procedures, particularly caesarean sections and hysterectomies. Urgent regulation of quality and medically indicated caesarean section and hysterectomy is needed to protect women from this profound disability.

Behind each woman living with a fistula or those who have received treatment is a deeply moving story of a woman who suffered for years with pain, loss and no hope. Nearly one-third of women had been living with a fistula for more than 20 years before receiving treatment. Many were married as adolescents, delivered at home without a skilled birth attendant, and developed fistula following prolonged obstructed labour.

For every maternal death, many more women suffer severe maternal morbidities and lifelong disabilities, one of which is obstetric fistula. Obstetric fistula is usually a "near miss" case—a case where we nearly lost the life of a mother. This reminds us that maternal health cannot be measured by survival alone.

Preventing obstetric fistula starts with ensuring every woman has access to quality maternal healthcare across the continuum of care, from communities to health facilities, encompassing adolescent health, voluntary family planning, antenatal care, institutional delivery, postnatal care, and effective referrals for managing complications. Every delay in recognising complications, reaching care, and receiving quality treatment increases the risk of obstetric fistula, other severe complications, and, in some cases, maternal and newborn death. National and global evidence shows that midwife-led maternity care can significantly prevent and manage obstructed labour, increase hospital births and decrease home deliveries, and strengthen early referrals—all key to preventing obstetric fistula.

One of the biggest remaining challenges is reaching every woman living with the condition. The majority hide because of shame, fear, stigma, or simply because they do not know that treatment is possible. That is why Bangladesh must now shift from passive case detection to active case finding. The health system, with support from communities, must reach those women at their doorsteps, counsel them, bring them to health facilities, ensure treatment, and fully rehabilitate them.

The country has already embarked on this approach. In 2025, under the leadership of local health authorities, 349,431 households were screened to identify suspected obstetric fistula cases across 10 upazilas in six districts. Eighty-seven suspected cases were identified, 32 cases confirmed, 18 repaired so far, while the remaining are awaiting surgery, and 15 women have already received rehabilitation support. Frontline health workers, midwives, family welfare assistants, health assistants, and community volunteers were all engaged in making the campaign successful.

Bangladesh has rolled out its Third National Strategy to End Obstetric Fistula (2023-2030), providing a detailed roadmap for action, including active case detection, which, if fully implemented, can yield the desired results. These approaches now need a nationwide scale-up.

The work is too important and urgent. It calls for the strongest possible coordination and collaboration among government ministries and departments, professional bodies, civil society, communities, and development partners. We know what works. What is needed now is the political will, investments in deploying midwives at union health facilities, equipping district hospitals with 24/7 obstetricians and anaesthetists with all that is required for emergency C section and a concerted effort to identify and refer every woman with a fistula for treatment. Only then will we be able to eliminate obstetric fistula in Bangladesh by 2030.

The Daily Star Reg. No. DA 781 | **EDITOR & PUBLISHER: Mahfuz Anam** Printed by him on behalf of Mediaworld Ltd at Transcraft Ltd, 229, Tejgaon Industrial Area, editor@thedailystar.net | **Registered & Head Offices:** The Daily Star Centre 64-65 Kazi Nazrul Islam Avenue, Dhaka-1215 Phone: 09610222222 | **Newsroom:** Fax- 58156306 reporting@thedailystar.net | **Advertisement:** 01711623910 advertisement@thedailystar.net GPO Box: 3257 | **Subscription:** 01711623906 | thedailystar.net bangla.thedailystar.net/