Amid a dangerous rise in child rape, we must confront our failures

Shaheen Anam
is executive director at Manusher Jonno Foundation (MJF).

SHAHEEN ANAM

Rights organisation Ain o Salish Kendra (ASK) recently reported that at least 118 children were raped between January and May 20 this year, while 46 others faced attempted rape. According to another human rights organisation Odhikar, some 5,942 underage girls were raped across Bangladesh between January 2016 and March 2026. The latest among these crimes that has caused widespread outrage was the rape, murder, and dismemberment of a second grader in Dhaka's Pallabi area. The alleged perpetrator, who has "confessed" to the crime, is a next-door neighbour who lured the child to his flat and carried out this heinous act.

Clearly, we, as a society, are failing to protect the most vulnerable among us. Children are no longer safe in their homes. A recent survey by child rights organisation Shishurai Shob, prepared by compiling published news reports from 2025, revealed that around 66 percent of child murders and some 59 percent of sexual abuse cases occurred in familiar settings by those known to the victims.

They are not safe in public places, as street children regularly fall prey to various forms of brutality, including sexual assault. Nor are they safe in educational institutions, including madrasas. Sexual assault within families or religious institutions remains a taboo subject that no one wants to talk about or address; meanwhile, offenders thrive under a culture of silence, fear, and false honour.

Each such case is a grim reminder of the extreme brutality faced by our children. Last September, an eight-year-old child from Magura was raped by the father-in-law of her sister, who later died. There were widespread protests all over the country, but that did not change much, as sexual violence against women, girls, and children continues unabated. There have been hundreds of similar cases, from Magura to Pallabi, most of which are under trial.

Those of us working for decades on the prevention of violence against women and children are reduced to a state of helplessness, with no solution or recourse in sight. The question that haunts us is: how did we come to this, and what can we do to prevent the spiral of cruelty and violence against children?

Lack of justice is cited as one reason. More than 10 lakh cases are currently pending before the country's Women and Children Repression Prevention Tribunals, while over 10,000 rape cases have remained unresolved for more than five years. The conviction rate in child rape cases is also alarmingly low, remaining close to zero. Offenders enjoy a sense of impunity, knowing they will get away with it, as there is little fear of retribution or punishment.

The arduous process of seeking justice starts with insensitive attitudes at police stations. Delays in dispensing justice force most survivors, especially those with limited incomes, to give up halfway, feeling humiliated, exhausted, and drained of resources. On the other hand, survivors of rape, even children, are stigmatised, forcing many to leave their village or community. Adult survivors are blamed for being in the wrong place at the wrong time or for wearing "unacceptable" clothes. Those who have the resilience to pursue their cases till the end often see offenders walk away through money or muscle power. Authorities cite case backlogs, inadequate staffing, and shortages of judges as reasons for the low conviction rate. Meanwhile, long delays cause witnesses to lose patience or withdraw out of fear of retribution. A victim and witness protection law is yet to be enacted. Out-of-court settlements are also cited as a reason behind the low conviction rate.

VISUAL: ALIZA RAHMAN

There is no doubt that the lack of justice for victims and survivors and the failure to hold perpetrators accountable, is one of the most important reasons behind rising violence. But perhaps we need to look beyond that for a broader understanding. The present scenario depicts a harrowing picture of moral decay that has permeated every segment of our society. What is fuelling such behaviour? Is it innate hatred and disrespect for women, or has misogyny reached such an extent that even children are perceived as sexual objects?

There seems to be a complete breakdown of the social fabric that once bound communities together. There was a time when each member of the traditional "para" was considered like family, and people felt a responsibility to look out for and protect one another. We no longer know our neighbours, and people, especially women, fear that if they are attacked in public, even within their own neighbourhood, nobody will come forward to rescue them.

There is also an absence of discussion around social cohesion and empathy. We do not teach our children to respect others, accept differences, and celebrate diversity. Basic principles of human rights and their universality do not feature prominently in our education system, resulting in a generation of youth growing up socially isolated, alienated, and detached from social responsibility or respect for others. In a culture of entrenched patriarchy, women and children become victims of the failure of both the state and society to provide a harmonious and peaceful environment.

Another important factor to consider is the unchecked use of social media, drugs, and pornography, all of which are available with little restriction or monitoring. In the absence of sex education in schools, young people resort to unhealthy and distorted ways of imagining and practising sex. Social media is full of violent and degrading imagery depicting women as sex objects. Drug abuse is rampant, and government efforts to curb this scourge have largely failed. Many crimes, including sexual crimes, are reportedly committed under the influence of drugs.

None of the above is meant to excuse heinous crimes such as the rape and murder of children. Rather, this is an attempt to understand the underlying issues contributing to the recurrence of such brutalities. We need to look deep within ourselves and ask whether we are doing enough individually to protect the most vulnerable among us, and how far we are willing to go to stand beside someone in distress. Unfortunately, we have failed to harness our collective strength. We need to remember that those of us who reject violence and believe in human rights for all are still in the majority, and the offenders who prey on vulnerable children are a minority. How can we let them prevail over us, then? We have to strengthen our collective movements and stand up against every violation of rights and every act of violence as if the victims and survivors were our own.

I will end by recounting a story. A lawyer was making his final statement on behalf of his client, whose eight-year-old daughter was raped and left to die. He asked the judges to close their eyes and picture a little girl playing happily in a field before being picked up by three grown men. He then asked them to imagine her terrified face and hear her screams as these men brutalised her frail little body until she lay lifeless.

I ask those reading this article to do the same. Close your eyes and picture a little girl you love and ask yourself, could she end up like Ramisa or any of the other unfortunate children that we failed to protect?

Could this budget set the groundwork for a trillion-dollar economy?

Ashfaq Zaman
is founder of Dhaka Forum and a strategic international affairs expert.

ASHFAQ ZAMAN

Every country that has gone through a serious economic transformation will cite a defining budget, not because of the size of expenditure or the number of projects announced within it, but because the budget was one that introduced a new economic direction.

Bangladesh may be approaching such a moment. Finance Minister Amir Khasru Mahmud Chowdhury has repeatedly framed the country's economic future around the ambition of building a trillion-dollar economy within the next decade. The government's newly approved five-year strategic framework outlines investment-led growth, universal social protection, institutional reform, and increasing domestic revenue through digitisation and deeper integration across the economy. So, if done and followed up properly, the upcoming FY2026-27 budget could set the foundations for that long-term ambition of becoming a trillion-dollar economy.

Of course, Bangladesh is entering this budget cycle under significant pressure. Growth has slowed, inflation poses difficulty for ordinary people, the banking sector is under strain, and the country's tax-to-GDP ratio remains among the lowest in the world. At the same time, the government is trying to attract investment, stabilise markets, expand social protection, and prepare for a more competitive global trade environment.

But one important shift has already happened. The discussion around this budget is not only about austerity, subsidies, or borrowing from institutions like the IMF, World Bank, or ADB. There is now a growing discussion around how Bangladesh can raise its own revenue more intelligently, formalise more of its economy, and use technology to increase state capacity.

For decades, Bangladesh's fiscal conversation has remained relatively narrow. Whenever the government has needed resources, the discussion usually revolved around foreign loans, donor support, increasing taxes, and/or cutting expenditure. But there are other ways to think about revenue.

Many countries are now using instruments like diaspora bonds and green bonds to mobilise capital from citizens and investors who want to contribute to long-term national projects. Bangladesh has a large overseas population and increasing international interest in climate-linked financing. These are areas that deserve exploration.

At the same time, the government also needs to rethink how it delivers public services. One of the more practical ideas is expanding premium or express government services across multiple sectors. Bangladesh already has examples of this. In the passport system, citizens can pay higher fees for faster delivery. In many cases, people are willing to pay more for quick and reliable service. This not only increases government revenue without raising tax rates, it also reduces dependency on middlemen and, therefore, reduces corruption. A citizen who can legally pay for a faster passport service is less likely to rely on brokers or unofficial payments. The same logic could potentially be expanded to services related to driving licences, vehicle registration, birth certificates, land records, and more.

The cost to the government of processing many of these services often remains relatively similar. But if even some percentage of the population chooses premium processing, the government's revenue could increase significantly while simultaneously improving public experience.

The biggest long-term opportunity, however, may lie in Bangladesh's growing digital public infrastructure.

Over the past decade, Bangladesh has quietly built many of the building blocks needed for a modern interoperable payment ecosystem. Mobile financial services are now used by millions of people. Bangla QR has already been introduced. National ID infrastructure exists. Interoperability among financial systems has also improved. But these systems still largely operate in fragments.

Countries like India have demonstrated what is possible when payment systems, identity systems, and tax systems begin communicating with each other through a unified structure. India's UPI transformed not only digital transactions, but also the country's visibility over economic activity.

The deeper issue in Bangladesh's tax system is that much of the economy remains outside the visible formal system. The government cannot dramatically increase tax rates overnight. But it can increase revenue, guided by a better understanding where economic activity is happening. If systems like the NID, payment gateways, banking infrastructure, and tax databases become more integrated, institutions like the National Board of Revenue (NBR) would gain far better visibility into money flows, transaction patterns, and economic activity. Over time, this would make tax monitoring and collection more efficient, without a reliance on aggressive enforcement.

Even small transaction fees on massive digital payment volumes can generate meaningful revenue. More importantly, the data generated through these systems can gradually expand the formal economy itself.

Currently, a huge portion of Bangladesh's economy operates outside formal taxation and institutional support. Small restaurants, food carts, neighbourhood grocery shops, roadside businesses, workshops, and thousands of small family-run enterprises generate real income and real economic activity, yet many remain entirely outside the formal system. This also creates an imbalance as, for example, a salaried employee earning Tk 30,000 per month may end up paying taxes through formal deductions, while a profitable small business operating entirely in cash may contribute nothing to the tax system.

But formalising the informal economy cannot be achieved through punishment alone. The transition has to be designed as an incentive-based structure.

One possible approach could be introducing simplified flat-rate taxation for small informal businesses based on category and size. Instead of complex compliance requirements, a small grocery shop, food stall, or neighbourhood restaurant could pay a modest fixed monthly amount depending on their turnover. The key, however, is that taxation must come with benefits. If a small business owner formally registers and pays a simple flat tax, they should also become eligible for incentives like microcredit, working capital loans, social protection benefits, and/or simplified licensing. Even a relatively modest loan can help restock products, maintain cash flow, and reduce dependency on informal lenders. This is how formalisation can be made attractive to those operating within the informal economy.

The government already appears to be moving towards more inclusive welfare mechanisms through initiatives like the Family Card. Expanding these systems while linking them gradually to financial inclusion and digital infrastructure could help create a more integrated social protection framework.

The upcoming budget also carries political significance as it may help define the economic narrative of the current government's early period. That narrative should not only focus on macroeconomic stability or headline growth numbers. It should focus on inclusion. For the first time in many years, there is visible discussion around bringing previously excluded populations into formal economic systems, expanding social protection in more structured ways, and using technology not simply for digitisation, but also for increasing institutional capacity.

That does not mean the challenges are small. Global uncertainty remains significant. Energy markets are volatile. Trade pressures continue. The banking sector still requires deep reform. Institutional execution capacity also remains uneven. And the question of prospective LDC graduation itself is uncertain and evolving. But it is precisely because of these pressures that Bangladesh needs a budget that is planned structurally rather than temporarily.

The country's long-term ambition of becoming a trillion-dollar economy will not be achieved atop isolated mega projects alone. It will require expanding the formal economy, increasing government revenue intelligently, improving state services, strengthening financial infrastructure, and building trust between citizens and institutions. That is what makes this budget important. It can signal whether Bangladesh is ready to begin constructing the systems required for this next phase in its economy.

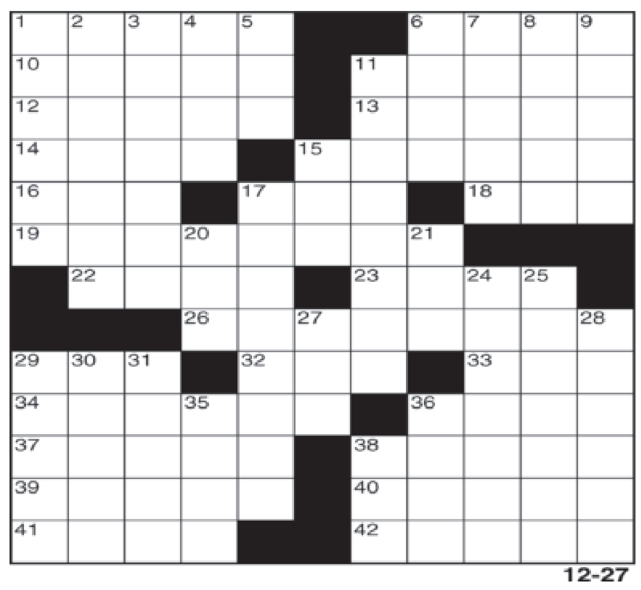
CROSSWORD
BY THOMAS JOSEPH

ACROSS

1 Mob bosses
6 Pop star
10 Not out
11 Hag
12 Said with a twang
13 Washer cycle
14 Pretentious
15 Raw bar item
16 Cardinal color
17 In addition
18 Pig's place
19 Fresh-faced
22 Phobia
23 New Mexico art colony
26 Difficult word
29 --- Jacinto
32 Ring win
33 G-man's org.
34 Dream up
36 Tag info
37 Some messages
38 Shows nervousness
39 --- Dame
40 Madrid month
41 Hector's home
42 Tire-making city

DOWN

1 Yellow bird
2 Not oblivious to
3 Bill stamp
4 Acceptable
5 Salt, to Simone
6 Crocus cousin
7 Forbidden acts
8 Start
9 Suspicious
11 Beckon from afar
15 Punch-in-the-gut sound
17 Engine valve
20 Scot's cap
21 --- -di-dah
24 Force member
25 Very cold
27 Luau strings
28 Rests atop
29 Fragrance
30 Knight wear
31 "Swell!"
35 Light
36 Went under
38 Pod bit



12-27

FRIDAY'S ANSWERS

C	A	V	E	S	■	T	I	A	R	A
A	D	E	L	E	■	A	S	S	E	T
B	O	X	I	N	G	M	A	T	C	H
O	R	E	■	D	O	E	■	A	I	L
T	E	S	T	E	R	S	■	I	T	E
■	■	■	I	R	E	■	F	R	E	T
P	O	S	E	S	■	G	E	E	S	E
L	I	E	S	■	H	O	E	■	■	■
E	L	L	■	M	O	N	D	A	L	E
A	L	L	■	A	L	E	■	C	U	T
S	A	F	E	T	Y	M	A	T	C	H
E	M	O	T	E	■	A	M	O	R	E
S	P	R	A	Y	■	D	I	R	E	R

WRITE FOR US. SEND US YOUR OPINION PIECES TO
dsopinion@gmail.com