

From a shrine pond to a Mirpur flat: We keep mourning what we fail to protect



BLOWIN' IN THE WIND
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The removal of the last crocodile from the pond at the shrine of Hazrat Khan Jahan Ali in Bagerhat ended a centuries-old tradition. The local deputy commissioner deemed it a necessary act of public safety following the tragic death of a child who was recently dragged away into the pond by the predator. The incident exposes layers of legal, ethical, moral, political and biological issues that question the very essence of our humanity.

Legend has it that the 15th-century saint-pilgrim Khan Jahan Ali released two big crocodiles in the pond that he had dug out next to his mosque. The reptiles would keep polluters away, and the freshwater species in a saline-prone pond also helped the ecological balance. For generations, these wild animals were folded into faith, memory, local economy, and ritual expectation. Devotees would feed the descendants of the darling pets of the revered *pir* and contribute to the mazar currency. When the original descendants died, the government replaced them with mugger crocodiles imported from India and kept the tradition alive. The animal remained at the core of tourist attraction, both loved and feared.

For many, those crocodiles were the source of wish fulfilment. This process of human meaning-making does not change the fundamental nature of a crocodile; it remains a crocodile regardless of our perceptions. A crocodile does not become

holy simply because it is placed in a sacred pond. It has nothing to do with our offering, curiosity or safety.

Yet, it has become a part of our living tradition. The best that could have been done was to protect visitors and local residents from this large carnivorous reptile which has been brought in by design to a captive location. There should have been barriers, regulated access, clear warning systems, proper feeding rules, and trained wildlife supervision. Instead, we relied on habit, sentiment, and miracle. We allowed dangerous human-animal contact to continue. When the crocodile killed a dog and later a child, the boundary between sacred spectacle and public danger collapsed, and the tragedy made the arrangement morally indefensible.

Instead of framing the issue as a debate on tradition versus modernity, we need to ask whether we are capable of caring for what we claim to value. If the crocodile was heritage, why was it not managed responsibly? If the child's safety mattered, why was the danger not addressed earlier? If the shrine was sacred, why was its ecology left to improvisation?

We move from the sacred shrine of Bagerhat to Dhaka to understand the case of Nurjahan Begum, the 75-year-old woman who was found dead in her home in Mirpur. What shook the public was not only the

loneliness of her death but also the profile of her children: a senior government official, a university teacher, and a well-settled expat, as well as a school teacher who lived in the same residence. On paper, the family is successful. In reality, an elderly mother seems to have vanished behind a closed door.

Given the ongoing legal process, we should handle the details of this case with national mythology. Mothers are praised for giving up comfort, food, sleep, ornaments, leisure, and occasionally their health so that their children may become "established." But what happens to the mother after the children are established?

Not long ago, the *para*, or neighbourhood, was the glue that held life together in our society. The whole community would keep its members under a close eye. If an elderly

person did not appear in the morning, someone noticed. "If the kitchen fire was not lit," someone asked. If a familiar voice went missing from the courtyard, absence became news. The modern city has changed that architecture. We now live in flats, behind doors rather than among neighbours. We have gained privacy and mastered the art of concealing loneliness. A person can be alive in one room and socially invisible in another.

It's time for us to recognise that this family failure is also a social failure. We have taught our children to compete, achieve, migrate, publish, administer, and accumulate. But have we taught them how to sit beside an ageing parent without impatience? Have we taught them that care is not charity but an obligation of love?

After public outrage, the state responded through administrative punishment, just like the Bagerhat deputy commissioner. The Parents' Maintenance Act, which maintains that children are legally accountable when they abandon parents, was invoked. Nurjahan's eldest son, a high-ranking government official, was made an OSD.

This situation is the tragedy of our time, where the human-animal, sacred-profane boundaries are being reconfigured. The efficiency and success of educated modern people are devoid of empathy and kindness. We are becoming successful without becoming humane. The crocodile in Bagerhat and the locked room in Mirpur may seem like unrelated stories. One belongs to a shrine pond, the other to an urban flat. One concerns a wild animal, the other an elderly mother. Yet, both reveal the same moral architecture.

We create systems of use and reverence and then abandon the beings within them when they become inconvenient. We worship symbols but neglect responsibilities. We perform grief after failing to practice care. The harder task is not mourning but noticing things before they happen. We need to notice devotion before it becomes an unsafe spectacle. We need to notice an elderly parent before they disappear inside the home. We need to notice how our professional titles are becoming a poor substitute for human decency. Until we learn that care is not an emotion but a daily discipline, we will continue to weep after the fact.



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Will 2026 be the turning point for women farmers in Bangladesh?

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The United Nations General Assembly's designation of 2026 as the "International Year of the Woman Farmer" is a landmark recognition of the central role women play in agriculture, food systems, and rural economies. It also confronts a long-standing truth: while women farmers feed communities and families, safeguard ecosystems, and drive economic growth, they continue to face structural and cultural barriers that limit their full participation.

Women constitute 58 percent of the agricultural workforce in Bangladesh, yet they remain largely invisible in policy and statistics. According to the latest Labour Force Survey by the Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics (BBS), women perform key roles in crop production, livestock, fishery, and post-harvest production. In livestock alone, nearly 60 percent of smallholder cattle farms are run by women. Despite this central role in

agricultural production, these contributions go largely unrecognised, limiting farming women's access to agricultural subsidies and extension services. Beyond the fields, this marginalisation is compounded by a profound time poverty, with women spending 7.3 times as many hours as men on unpaid care and domestic work daily. This disproportionate burden of unpaid care work is not incidental but rooted in structural inequalities, including unequal power relations and limited access to resources.

Only about 13 percent of rural women have sole or joint land ownership, compared with 70 percent of men, due to inheritance practices, legal barriers, and social norms. Even when women cultivate land, their influence over decisions about what crops to plant, how to market produce, or how to invest income remains limited. The latest data from the Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) shows that women represent 40 percent of the global agricultural labour force but earn only \$0.78 for every dollar earned by men in agri-food employment. Women tend to farm smaller plots and face disproportionate exposure to climate impacts, which constrain productivity and income. Closing gender gaps in employment, education, and income could reduce global food insecurity by more than 50 percent, benefiting millions.

A 2025 joint study on Economic Returns to Women's Empowerment, commissioned by the International Fund for Agricultural Development (IFAD) and conducted with FAO, World Food Programme (WFP), UN

Women, and the UN Resident Coordinator Office (UNRCO) found that targeted investments in women's empowerment in rural Bangladesh generate a benefit-cost ratio of 4:1, with measurable gains not only in household income and financial inclusion but also in women's decision-making power, mobility, and community leadership. This tells us that economic investment alone is not enough. Deliberate attention to gender norms and decision-making power is what can unlock the full benefit.

In Bangladesh, the UN system is working with the government and key partners to strengthen the economic participation of rural women, linking production to markets and finance while generating evidence to inform policy and scale successful models.

Across UN agencies, these initiatives reflect complementary efforts to advance women's empowerment. FAO works through farmer organisations to strengthen capacity and expand women's access to finance, markets, and business skills, enabling them to take leadership roles in agricultural value chains. IFAD delivers integrated investments in agriculture, climate-resilient infrastructure, inclusive finance, and markets, complemented by youth and women-led enterprises and nutrition initiatives, anchored in gender-transformative, community-driven approaches that strengthen women's economic power and decision-making. WFP supports vulnerable women in transitioning from food assistance to self-reliance, supporting them in establishing and scaling income-generating enterprises that

strengthen their economic independence and resilience to shocks. UN Women provides the normative and policy anchoring that connects these field-level gains to national gender equality commitments.

Where these efforts have reached women farmers, the results are measurable. In rural enterprise development interventions, incomes have increased by nearly 50 percent and enterprise profits by over 40 percent. These are not marginal gains; they reflect what women farmers can achieve when finance, training and market access come together.

This pattern holds across diverse contexts. In Kurigram and Satkhira, where climate vulnerability is pronounced, and in Cox's Bazar, where complex humanitarian pressures persist, this integrated approach has delivered particularly striking results. There, UN agencies and partners work with smallholder farmers, mostly women, applying climate-smart production practices and connecting farmers to local retailers and humanitarian food assistance supply chains to Rohingya refugees. As a result, nearly 40,000 farmers have received support and been linked to reliable markets, enabling their transition from subsistence food production to market-oriented production. With access to real-time market information and skills and enterprise development support, these women are no longer seen simply as labourers; they are recognised as economic actors with the capacity to negotiate fair prices and engage in markets.

Scaling this success from regional hubs

to a national standard requires more than technical training. Beyond these market-based successes, advancing equitable land rights and inheritance protections remains essential to fully realise Bangladesh's agricultural potential. By combining anticipatory action and climate risk insurance with inclusive agricultural planning, the state can ensure that women's contributions are not only recognised in data but safeguarded and reinforced through policy and law.

At the same time, policy reforms must be matched with effective delivery systems that enable women to access finance, extension services, and markets in practice, not just in principle. Governments, organisations, and communities must move beyond recognition to ensure that women are formally included, equitably resourced, and meaningfully represented in agricultural systems and decision-making. Strengthening their access to land, finance, extension services, and markets is not only a matter of gender justice but also a foundation for resilient food systems and sustainable development.

As the International Year of the Woman Farmer progresses, is it translating into real change such as empowering women-led groups, expanding access to climate-resilient technology, and driving policies that finally recognise women as independent farmers. For Bangladesh, this year is both a call and an opportunity. The evidence is clear, and the returns are real. The only question is whether the ambition to act will match the scale of the need.

CROSSWORD
BY THOMAS JOSEPH

ACROSS

1 Track event

5 Lands in the sea

10 Vigorous spirit

11 Sung dramas

13 Ilk

14 Dawning period

15 Resistance to change

17 401, in Rome

18 Annual celebration

19 Light metal

20 Summer cooler

21 Smallville family name

22 Sales pitch

25 Hands over

26 Job

27 Foot part

28 Baseball score

29 Rhode Island city

33 Anger

34 About to be a mother

35 Soothing music style

37 Surfer's ride

38 Hot dish support

39 Grace finish

40 Flag features

41 Croquet setting

DOWN

1 Pine product

2 Without help

3 Baseball's Rod

4 Cost to compete

5 Sea between Italy and Greece

6 Asparagus unit

7 Detective Archer

8 Built

9 Fish in a can

12 New Orleans team

16 Blue hue

21 Ward off

22 Quick run

23 Sommeliers, at times

24 "Told you!"

25 Monk's hood

27 Beliefs

29 Chad neighbor

30 44th president

31 Wanderer

32 Leaning

36 Director DuVernay

1-1

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9

10 11 12

13 14

15 16 17

18 19

20 21

22 23 24 25

26 27

28 29 30 31 32

33 34

35 36 37

38 39

40 41

YESTERDAY'S ANSWERS

COMBAT VIAL
APIECE ISTO
RELATE TOTO
BRATS BATIK
SANS SALOME
MOON PER
DEEP FAKES
MAA TALE
OYSTER YAPS
STEAD RENAL
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