

A gender-responsive budget must address the unpaid care burden



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Bangladesh has often been recognised as a pioneer in gender-responsive budgeting, yet the female labour force is actively shrinking. Between 2023 and 2024, it dropped by 16 lakh. For more than a decade, successive governments have reported gender budget allocations across more than 40 ministries, positioning women's empowerment as a national development priority. The proposed FY2026-27 budget continues this tradition while placing employment generation, SME growth, entrepreneurship, migration, investment, and productivity at the centre of our economic recovery agenda.

These are important priorities. Bangladesh needs jobs, productive enterprises, and renewed economic confidence. But amid discussions of growth and employment, one critical question has received remarkably little attention: can a budget be truly gender responsive if it does not adequately address the unpaid care burden that keeps millions of women out of the labour market?

Women constitute nearly half of Bangladesh's population and remain central to the country's economic success story. From garments and agriculture to microenterprise and digital commerce, women's labour has powered growth across sectors. At the same time, Bangladesh continues to struggle with relatively low female labour force participation compared to men. According to the Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics' Labour Force Survey 2024, women's labour force participation stood at 38.40 percent, compared to 79.96 percent for men. Most of the time, the major reason is care responsibilities at home.

Therefore, looking at the care agenda matters because women are not on the margins of Bangladesh's economy. They are central to it. Although the budget talks about establishing 80 day-care facilities for working mothers in the upcoming fiscal year, the scale of investment in this area is undoubtedly low. Even if half of the 2.37 crore female workers are mothers, the total number of government-run



VISUAL: ANWAR SOHEL

day-care centres—existing and proposed—amounting to a little less than 150 across the country, would not be adequate.

It must be acknowledged that the responsibilities that women continue to carry, relating to childcare, elder care, cooking, cleaning and household management works are essential to the functioning of families and the broader economy. But they are still largely unrecognised and uncompensated. Recent evidence suggests the scale of this imbalance is far greater than many policymakers appreciate. Bangladesh's first comprehensive Time Use Survey found that women spend approximately seven times more time on unpaid domestic and care work than men. This is not merely a

household reality; it is a structural constraint on women's ability to participate in paid employment, grow businesses, pursue skills training, or migrate for work. When women carry the overwhelming burden of care, their economic choices become constrained long before they enter the labour market.

Thus, a woman may complete vocational training but remain unable to accept employment because childcare options are

economy in 2021—equivalent to 18.9 percent of GDP. Women accounted for approximately 85 percent of this contribution. If unpaid care work were treated as a productive sector, it would represent one of the largest contributors to the national economy. Yet discussions of productivity, investment and employment rarely acknowledge it.

This is particularly relevant given the budget's emphasis on SMEs and

This raises a broader question about how Bangladesh defines gender-responsive budgeting, since, historically, general allocations that happen to include women would be building a road where women might walk on. But a true gender budget should not just count women as passive beneficiaries; it must actively dismantle the structural barriers of care burden. Therefore, childcare deserves far greater attention than it did in the proposed FY2026-27 budget.

Investments in community childcare centres, workplace childcare facilities, early childhood services and care-support infrastructure should be viewed not simply as social expenditures but as economic investments. Just as roads connect workers to markets and electricity powers businesses, care infrastructure enables greater labour force participation.

Bangladesh would not be the first country to adopt such an approach. In 2015, Uruguay established a National Integrated Care System that expanded childcare, elder care and support services while recognising care as a shared responsibility between households, communities, markets and the state. The underlying logic was simple: if care responsibilities keep women out of paid employment, then investing in care is also an investment in economic productivity. Bangladesh may not replicate Uruguay's model directly, but it offers an important lesson. Care infrastructure should not be viewed solely as a social welfare expenditure; it is an economic enabler.

The finance minister has rightly placed employment, investment and productivity at the centre of the FY2026-27 budget. But if women are expected to contribute fully to these national goals, then the policies supporting their participation must receive equal attention. A serious conversation about jobs, entrepreneurship and migration must also be a conversation about care.

As Bangladesh charts its next phase of economic growth, perhaps the most important question is not how many jobs will be created, but whether the women who could fill them will have the opportunity to do so.

If unpaid care work contributes nearly one-fifth of GDP, then a truly gender-responsive budget cannot afford to treat care as an afterthought. The real measure of a gender-responsive budget is whether the budget addresses the realities that shape women's lives.

‘Sportswashing’ comes to America through the FIFA World Cup



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The FIFA World Cup has always been more than football. It is a celebration of identity, belonging, and collective joy that can stop entire countries in their tracks. And for the next few weeks, the world will share a common language: the FIFA language.

But while FIFA promotes the tournament as a celebration of global unity, the World Cup also threatens to become a powerful instrument of political image-making. The term often used to describe this phenomenon is “sportswashing,” the use of major sporting events to improve host countries' reputations, distract from controversy, and project an image of legitimacy.

For years, sportswashing has been discussed in relation to countries such as Russia, Qatar, and Saudi Arabia. Governments have long understood the power of sporting events to shape public perception. The Olympic Games in Nazi Germany in 1936 remain one of the most famous examples. Decades later, Argentina's military dictatorship used the 1978 World Cup to project an image of national

unity while political repression continued in the background. Russia's hosting of the 2018 World Cup generated similar debates. Critics argued that the tournament allowed President Vladimir Putin's government to showcase modern stadiums and hospitality while international attention drifted away from concerns about democratic freedoms and foreign policy. Qatar's hosting of the 2022 World Cup sparked scrutiny over labour conditions, migrant worker deaths, and human rights concerns.

So, what happens when sportswashing comes to the United States? The 2026 FIFA World Cup has arrived amid a deeply polarised political climate, with President Donald Trump facing criticism over immigration policies, foreign affairs, and economic management. The tournament thus offers an opportunity for the Trump administration to project a more celebratory image of the country to both domestic and international audiences.

Like other host cities, Washington, DC, has embraced that effort through various fun

and celebratory activities, including at the National Mall, where fans can gather free of charge in what organisers call the “World Cup Fan Zone.” The space is designed to celebrate football and bring communities together. It also illustrates how mega-sporting events can serve as powerful symbols of national unity and pride during moments of political tension.

Before the tournament, however, US immigration policy and human rights concerns emerged as central issues in sports discussions. In December, Trump announced a travel ban on 39 countries, prohibiting citizens of those countries from entering the US. Advocacy groups have since warned that travel bans, visa complications, and heightened immigration enforcement could exclude many supporters, players, and officials from the tournament. As we now know, that warning has already been borne out in some cases.

Recently, top Somali referee Omar Artan became the latest to face the stringent US travel policies. Omar Artan, 34, was set to make history as the first Somali referee to officiate at a World Cup, but his dream debut ended at Miami airport, where he was denied entry to the country and flown back to Istanbul despite having a valid US visa and all required documents. Meanwhile, the US has barred the Iranian national team from staying overnight in the country, which led Iran to establish its base camp in Mexico instead of the US and commuting across the border for their games.

Beyond visitors, concerns also extend to immigrant communities already living in the

US. Reports of immigration raids, detention practices, and heightened enforcement activity have contributed to anxiety among some residents who would otherwise participate in World Cup celebrations. A tournament marketed as a global festival of inclusion is unfolding amid fierce debates about who is welcome and who is not, who can participate in the celebrations, and who cannot.

The World Cup arrives at a moment when the US has been entangled in a months-long military confrontation with Iran, which, according to the latest reports, might be coming to an end as both countries have reportedly agreed to a peace deal. However, since day one, this conflict has sparked international controversy, including debate over the legality of US military actions and concerns about regional escalation. The question is whether the spectacle of the world's biggest sporting event can help ease public scrutiny of a costly and divisive foreign-policy crisis that continues to dominate headlines.

Similarly, the war in Gaza remains one of the most contentious issues in global politics. Human rights organisations, international legal scholars, and some governments have accused Israel of committing grave violations of international law, while critics of Washington argue that continued American military and diplomatic support has made the US complicit in the humanitarian catastrophe. The administration rejects those accusations and maintains that its policies are consistent with US interests and international obligations. Nevertheless, the debate has become a major

source of international criticism. Against that backdrop, the World Cup offers a powerful public relations opportunity capable of shifting global attention away from the images of destruction and political controversy that have dominated international news coverage.

Many Americans also continue to express concerns about inflation, affordability, housing costs, and financial insecurity. Roughly 48 percent of Americans said their financial situation was worse in May than a year ago, according to the Federal Reserve Bank of New York's Survey of Consumer Expectations. The findings come amid an inflation spike driven by the Iran war, which has sent oil and gas prices soaring globally, including in Bangladesh. In such an environment, the World Cup presents an extraordinary opportunity for the US to reshape public narratives.

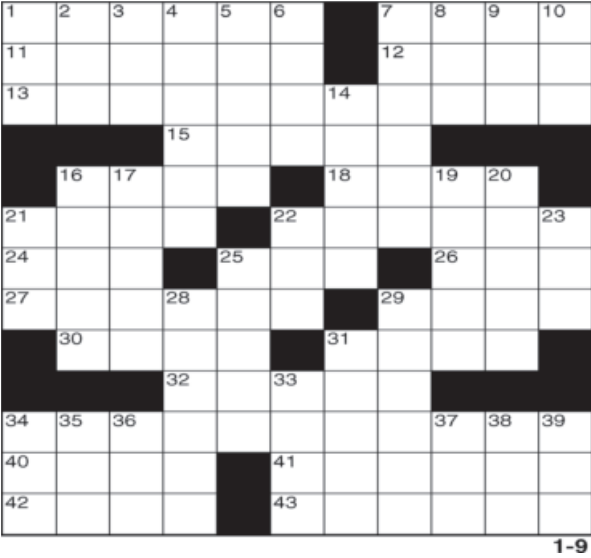
The 2026 World Cup may thus become one of the most politically significant tournaments in modern history and demonstrate how sportswashing can operate not only in authoritarian states but also in democratic states. Sportswashing often can compete with criticism by flooding public space with images of unity, celebration, and pride that often obscure uncomfortable realities. So, now the question is whether we will let the spectacle of the tournament overshadow the difficult realities that deserve sustained public attention. Because even when millions celebrate goals, rivalries, and unforgettable moments, the broader political context may not simply disappear.

CROSSWORD
BY THOMAS JOSEPH

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11 Venus's love
12 Region
13 Supple
15 Clickable pictures
16 Shore eroder
18 Washer unit
21 Candidate of 2000
22 Did the tango
24 King Kong, for one
25 Spotted
26 Letter after sigma
27 Marbles, so to speak
29 Chilly
30 Letter after epsilon
31 Cruise stop

- 32 Coffee add-in
34 Not talkative
40 Buffalo's lake
41 Smitten
42 Pesters
43 Fashions
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2 Bustle
3 Dove's cry
4 Contained
5 Brother's daughter
6 Capital on a fjord
7 Bible strongman
8 Sphere
9 Sheltered side
10 Pop
14 Relative by marriage

- 16 Yellow gem
17 Singer Cara
19 Cast member
20 Traded
21 Ozone, e.g.
22 Calendar box
23 Failure
25 Set off
28 Longings
29 Be submissive
31 Coat on the wall
33 Yale students
34 Common bill
35 Lyricist
Gershwin
36 Jazz job
37 Campaign pro
38 Genesis name
39 — Moines



SUNDAY'S ANSWERS

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