

Why are there so few women in politics?

Govt, EC and political parties must remove the underlying barriers

The findings of a new study on women's political participation, representation, and leadership in Bangladesh confirm the long-held concerns of activists and advocates of equal rights. It is not just the shortcomings at the party level that fail to create space for women in politics. Our society's patriarchal structure and perceptions, financial constraints, familial responsibilities, physical, sexual, and technology-facilitated violence, and the overall lack of safety—both online and offline—combine to create barriers for women.

The study by BRAC Institute of Governance and Development (BIGD), with support from the United Nations Electoral Assistance Programme (DRIP/BALLOT), analyses the obstacles at the entry, leadership, electoral participation, and representation levels in national and local settings. This analysis, based on 43 in-depth interviews with women parliamentarians, local government representatives, political party members, and public officeholders, as well as engagement with gender experts and civil society advocates, points to areas where changes can be initiated.

For instance, violence both online and offline remains a major barrier to women's entry into politics. While international data on violence against women in politics (VAWP) is available, in Bangladesh, this particular category of violence is not even recognised in legal or data systems, as per the study. VAWP is underreported because women fear retaliation, the possibility of being sidelined, and mistrust the institutional capacity of their respective parties to take appropriate action. This is because violence does not always come from rival political parties; it often originates within the same party.

In Bangladesh, where violence and infighting at the grassroots level often determine the future of local political leaders, women face slim prospects of gaining influence. In most cases, they need to have a strong political lineage or be ready to pay a heavy price, because attacks on their reputation sometimes even extend to their families. Often, a formal channel to report such violence is also absent.

The issues raised in the study cannot be addressed solely by enacting laws, which often remain unenforced, such as ensuring 33 percent female representation in political party committees, as mandated by the Representation of the People Order (RPO). Moreover, laws cannot change the misogynistic political culture that often spills over to social media, where women politicians, and even elected and reserved-seat MPs, are frequently targeted. This requires a societal shift in perceptions towards women, which can be achieved through public education over the years. However, some immediate actions can be taken by political parties, the government, and the Election Commission, including making parties' membership processes transparent and establishing a women-friendly complaint mechanism in line with the 2009 High Court ruling. Similarly, a commitment from all MPs to establish a sexual-harassment-free environment not only in the House or party offices but also in their respective constituencies would go a long way towards addressing VAWP and encouraging women's political participation. The question our lawmakers should ask is not why equal participation is crucial; it should be why it is absent.

Battery recycling must be regulated

Govt must take coordinated actions to rein in toxic informal recycling

Bangladesh generates nearly 4,80,000 tonnes of lead-acid battery waste annually, and the fact that around 80 percent of such batteries are processed at informal and illegal facilities is a grave concern, given the well-documented dangers of lead exposure. This raises the question: why an industry, which poses such a great risk to our environment, public health, and economy, is allowed to operate with so little oversight?

Lead is a highly toxic metal, and even very low levels can adversely affect nearly every organ in the body. Given that nearly two-thirds of children in Dhaka have high levels of lead in their blood, reining in this industry is essential to avoid a looming public health disaster. It is also important to consider the economic consequences of lead exposure, with estimates indicating that Bangladesh loses around \$29 billion annually due to its associated costs.

Lead exposure and unregulated battery recycling also impact other communities. For instance, workers in such factories often lack protective gear and are regularly exposed to lead dust and fumes. The uncontrolled establishment of such facilities near residential areas also contaminates the air, soil, and water. Besides, according to a report in this daily, an illegal battery recycling plant in Jamalpur polluted the surrounding croplands and waterbodies, claiming several cattle's lives last year. Yet, the government has not taken a coordinated approach to address the situation.

While regulating a rapidly growing industry, operating millions of battery-powered rickshaws nationwide, may be challenging, the government must build a system in which every battery manufactured is accounted for, safely recycled, and managed within a responsible circular economy. This requires identifying what makes informal recycling a desirable option for businesses and customers and bridging the information gap in the market. Many consumers reportedly lack knowledge of battery durability and performance, which retailers often exploit. Authorities can help increase consumer understanding of batteries and make environmental and regulatory compliance easy for businesses involved.

Ultimately, what we require is an all-hands-on-deck approach to combat the crisis posed by the lead-acid battery industry. It serves no one to continue treating this issue as a peripheral environmental crisis, because it also concerns public health and labour rights. So, we call upon the government to address the governance failures surrounding this industry so that no living being is forced to bear the cost of this toxic industry any longer.

Don't leave Kaiputras to bear the cost of highways



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In Dakshin Alipur of Satkhira Sadar upazila, a tragedy largely invisible to the wider public is unfolding. It's taking place not in some remote char or forest but beside an important highway. There, 46 Kaiputra families are watching their world crumble right before their eyes. According to eyewitness accounts, on February 6, 2026, when the Roads and Highways Department (RHD) began expanding the Satkhira-Shyamnagar highway through Dakshin Alipur, the roadside houses of five Kaiputra families collapsed. Families that had lived there for decades have since found themselves sleeping under sheets of polythene beneath the sky, with the remaining households in constant fear of meeting the same fate at any moment.

Although no written eviction notice has reportedly been served, local residents, members of the Kaiputra community, and journalists say the RHD has been making loudspeaker announcements instructing people living on RHD land to leave the area by June 24 or 25, or risk having their homes and other structures demolished. This is not simply another eviction story; it is a test of Bangladesh's humanity, because these landless families have nowhere else to go.

The Kaiputras, known for their traditional occupation of rearing pigs in open fields, are one of the most marginalised communities in Bangladesh who face severe social exclusion and untouchability due to their profession. They are concentrated in about 75 villages across Satkhira, Khulna, and Jashore districts, with an estimated population of around 12,000. Until recently, many people and even institutions, including the Ministry of Social Welfare in its official documents, referred to them as "Kawara", a term that carries strong derogatory connotations. The community now increasingly identifies itself as "Kaiputra", seeking dignity through a name free from humiliation. But changing a name alone cannot erase deeply entrenched prejudice formed over generations.

The Kaiputras occupy an uncomfortable place in our social hierarchy. In a Muslim-majority country where pigs are considered

unclean and their consumption is forbidden in Islam, they are often looked down upon by the majority population. At the same time, they have historically been regarded as "untouchables" within sections of Hindu society. There may be no other community in south-western Bangladesh that experiences such profound isolation, ostracism, and exclusion. The people of Dakshin



PHOTO: PROSAD SARKER

The Kaiputras of Dakshin Alipur in Satkhira are once again at risk of eviction amid the expansion of the regional highway.

Alipur carry this burden every day.

Their settlement stands on government khas land under Khatian No. 2, which is controlled by the RHD. Many elderly residents say they have been living there since before the country's independence. Entire generations have been born and raised there. Some even trace their residence back to the Ayub Khan era. Their poverty remains severe.

Many homes are little more than *jhupris* built from nipa palm leaves, rusted tin, and polythene. There is no proper sanitation. The 46 families still practise open defecation because no toilet facilities exist. Many women, elderly people, and widows survive through begging. Even those with disabilities do not receive government allowances despite being eligible. Perhaps what is most disturbing is that their poverty is the

result of an exclusion that is all but institutionalised by now.

During a visit, a woman named Shefali Mondol said she is rarely called for day labour anymore because people regard them as a "low caste" community. Many women openly speak about social humiliation, that in markets and tea stalls, they are often treated differently from others simply because their men work with pigs. This is despite the fact that there is a relatively sizeable market for pork that serves the economy. Pork produced through the labour of the Kaiputras and other means is consumed by non-Muslim communities, supplied to hotels, and sold in some urban markets, particularly in Dhaka. But the people who help sustain this economy remain invisible and often unwanted.

Their livelihood, moreover, is

increasingly under threat. Traditional pig rearing is declining rapidly. Many grazing lands have been lost to fish enclosures. Many Kaiputras have already abandoned their ancestral occupation and moved into fishing to escape stigma. Researchers say that traditional pig rearing may disappear within a generation. Against this backdrop, the Dakshin Alipur eviction threatens to erase one of their last physical footholds.

Yes, Bangladesh needs roads. Improved infrastructure is essential for economic growth, regional connectivity, and public welfare. But development cannot mean rendering the poorest citizens homeless. The RHD argues that the land legally belongs to them and that rehabilitation is not their responsibility but rather that of the district administration. Technically, this may be correct. The land was

reportedly acquired between 1962 and 1964, and the present plan is to expand the existing 18-foot road into a 34-foot two-lane highway. But legality is not the issue here. When one state institution demolishes homes while another is expected to rehabilitate the displaced, the most vulnerable among them risk falling through the gap between bureaucratic mandates.

The Kaiputras are not resisting development. They have proposed a practical solution: behind their current settlement lies additional khas land, and they are asking to be relocated there and provided permanent housing under the government's rehabilitation programme. They are not demanding private land, monetary compensation, or special privileges—only a place to live. Their request is modest, and the state should listen.

There is a border policy context beyond the RHD move that underlies the present situation: the government under Sheikh Hasina previously declared various upazilas in Satkhira to be free from landlessness and homelessness. But the existence of Dakshin Alipur clearly contradicts such claims. If these Kaiputra families are recognised as citizens, then Satkhira Sadar cannot be described as free of homelessness. This crisis demands an immediate course correction—all evictions must be suspended until rehabilitation is guaranteed; the district administration should allocate nearby khas land for the affected families; all households should be brought under the government's rehabilitation programme; and eligible residents must be included in social protection schemes, including family cards and widow, old-age, and disability allowances. Highly marginalised occupational communities such as the Kaiputras must also be recognised and protected.

This is a moral question about the kind of country we aspire to build: a country that widens roads while protecting the dignity of its most vulnerable citizens, or one that allows highways to be built over the lives of those who have remained invisible for generations. The people of Dakshin Alipur are not encroachers; they are citizens who have been left with nowhere else to go because society has never really made room for them. The moral burden is on us as a society. The Kaiputras have lived at the edge of society for generations. The state must not push them over the edge altogether.

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A case for turning Dhaka's flyovers into rainwater harvesters



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On June 12, the Bangladesh Meteorological Department said Dhaka had experienced about 43 millimetres of rain in just two hours. As usual, after heavy rain, like many spots in the city, the flyovers got flooded and water poured down from the edges. In some spots, the water looked like temporary urban waterfalls, with commuters trying to dodge them.

Most people find this phenomenon annoying. But what if we looked at it as a missed opportunity worth exploring?

Dhaka faces two major water problems: persistent waterlogging during the monsoon and a declining groundwater table year-round. The city still relies a lot on groundwater even as aquifer levels continue to drop. Meanwhile, a massive amount of rainwater is drained out of the city every year through drains, canals, and pumps.

What if we could collect some of that water and return it to the ground using the city's flyovers?

This idea may seem unusual, but it is worth serious consideration. In many places, rainwater harvesting systems collect water from rooftops

using gutters, filters, storage tanks, and recharge wells. The same idea can be applied on elevated structures like flyovers. Instead of letting rainwater run off onto the roads below, special drainage channels could guide it into filters, then into storage tanks or recharge wells.

Take a typical elevated road that is 15 metres wide and 10 kilometres long. That is a catchment area of about 150,000 square metres. If one bout of rain brings 100 millimetres of rain, or 0.1 metres, that surface could collect about 15,000 cubic metres of water, or 15 million litres, from just one spell of rainfall.

Now think about the entire network. Dhaka's flyovers, elevated expressways, and metro viaducts together stretch over a hundred kilometres. Even if only some of these had rainwater harvesting, a big rainstorm could yield several millions of litres of water.

Similar projects are at work in many places. In India, for instance, Along the Delhi-Meerut Regional Rapid Transit System corridor, around 900 rainwater harvesting and recharge pits have been developed beneath

elevated viaducts, stations, and depots. These structures capture runoff from elevated sections of the corridor and channel it through filtration systems into the ground, replenishing the local aquifers. Officials expect the system to recharge millions of cubic metres of groundwater while reducing stormwater runoff.

Singapore is another example. With limited land and water, the city has spent years integrating stormwater management into its roads, canals, reservoirs, and other infrastructure. Instead of seeing rainwater as a problem, Singapore treats it as a resource to be collected and reused.

To tackle its depleting groundwater issue, Dhaka should consider doing the same. The benefits could go well beyond just collecting water: it would mean less water entering drains during heavy rain, helping the city's already stressed drainage system. Some of this water could be directed into recharge wells to help replenish aquifers. Stored water can also be used for landscaping, construction, street cleaning, and park and green space maintenance. In a city facing both water shortage and flooding, this solution could address several problems at once.

This is the kind of multi-purpose infrastructure that cities facing climate risks really need. As cities grow and climate change brings more extreme weather, infrastructure cannot just do one job anymore. Roads, canals, parks, and public spaces should be designed to provide a range of environmental and social benefits.

Of course, there are real concerns. Rainwater from elevated roads is not the same as water from house rooftops. This runoff can carry contaminants and pollutants. There is a solution for that too. Cities around the world use sediment traps, filters, biofiltration, and recharge wells to keep stormwater clean. Also, the goal does not have to be producing drinking water. Refilling groundwater, helping city plants, lowering flood risk, and providing water for other uses would already be significant benefits.

The economic argument is just as strong. Bangladesh has already spent thousands of crores on flyovers, expressways, and metro lines. Adding rainwater harvesting to future projects or current upgrades would probably cost much less than building new water systems later. Often, the best way to adapt to climate change is with small changes that expand the utility of the existing infrastructure. Too often, climate adaptation discussions focus on costly technologies and large engineering projects. Sometimes, the smarter move is to rethink how we use what we already have.

Every monsoon, millions of litres of fresh water fall for free onto these concrete surfaces. We watch it run onto roads and into flood drains, causing waterlogging, and then vanish. Meanwhile, we keep drilling deeper into aquifers to meet the capital city's growing water needs. So, before approving the next flyover, expressway or big transport project, policymakers should ask one simple question: can this structure also collect rainwater?