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

Address measles' toll on the poor

Strengthen social protection alongside disease control

As the country continues to grapple with its worst measles outbreak in decades, another alarming consequence of the crisis is becoming increasingly evident. An assessment by the Bangladesh Red Crescent Society (BDRCS) and the International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies (IFRC) shows that the outbreak is pushing thousands of poor families into debt, with nearly nine in 10 affected households forced to borrow money to cover treatment-related expenses. These findings make it clear that the government's response should not focus solely on containing infections but must also protect vulnerable households from the devastating financial consequences of the outbreak.

As of July 31, at least 1.44 lakh patients, mostly children, had been hospitalised with measles or measles-like symptoms across the country this year, while measles-related death toll had reached 810. Based on a survey of 2,746 measles-affected households treated at 12 government hospitals, the assessment found that 88.9 percent of households had borrowed money to cover treatment-related costs, 60.8 percent had depleted their savings, and some had even been forced to sell assets or depend on donations. This is despite the fact that treatment at government hospitals is officially free. According to the assessment, treatment and related expenses average Tk 16,000 and can go up to Tk 65,000, including transport, diagnostic tests, and other daily necessities. For children requiring intensive care at private hospitals, costs often run into several lakh taka.

Since most affected families depend on informal work and earn between Tk 6,000 and Tk 20,000 a month, the financial burden has been severe. For low-income households travelling from rural areas to Dhaka after local health facilities fail to manage complications, these expenses can quickly become overwhelming. The assessment also found that many families lost wages or even their sources of income while caring for their sick children in hospital. Health economists have described the situation as a classic example of "catastrophic health expenditure," where healthcare costs consume such a large share of household income that families are compelled to borrow, exhaust their savings, or sell productive assets. The situation demands an urgent policy response.

Alongside strengthening vaccination, surveillance, and treatment capacity, authorities should establish an emergency treatment support fund for low-income families, ensure an uninterrupted supply of essential medicines in public hospitals, and expand targeted cash assistance during major health emergencies. At the same time, investment in district-level healthcare facilities must continue so that families are not forced to travel long distances for treatment. The health authorities should also closely monitor adenovirus co-infections, as doctors warn that this virus can worsen complications and rapidly deteriorate the condition of measles patients. This can prolong hospital stays, increase treatment costs, and place an even heavier financial burden on already struggling families.

Therefore, the government must take all measures possible to ensure that the financial burden of the measles outbreak does not push families further into poverty.

Microplastic invasion demands urgent action

Time to treat it as a public health emergency

The invasion of microplastics is no longer just a threat to our aquatic ecosystems. It has become an intimate, unavoidable part of our daily lives. Recent studies indicate that an alarming percentage of commercially important fish—such as hilsa, rohu, catla and pabda—contain microplastics in their gastrointestinal tracts and edible muscle tissues. But the threat goes far beyond our rivers. Microplastics have infiltrated almost everything we consume and use. They are in our fish, salt, soft drinks, milk, edible oil, and other food products. They are even in personal care products like the toothpaste we use every morning. From the dust on our streets to the water in our glasses, microscopic plastic fragments are everywhere. We are, quite literally, eating, drinking and brushing with them.

This pervasive contamination is the direct consequence of a systemic failure in environmental governance. Though Bangladesh made history in 2002 by banning thin polythene bags, the lack of implementation is glaring. Today, over 60 percent of retailers flout the ban, driven by an economic model addicted to cheap, disposable packaging. Dhaka alone generates approximately 646 tonnes of plastic waste daily. This mountain of waste inevitably chokes our rivers before breaking down into toxic particles poisoning our environment. The pollution is so widespread that even farmed fish are now ingesting microplastics through contaminated commercial feed.

We can no longer ignore this public health emergency, and the solutions require swift, tangible action rather than empty rhetoric. To complement this, the government must radically overhaul enforcement of regulations. Instead of relying on rare mobile courts to catch offenders in the act, local government bodies should be empowered to levy administrative fines on those who defy the ban. Furthermore, the economic reality of plastics must reflect their true cost. The state must implement Extended Producer Responsibility (EPR)—forcing manufacturers to manage the waste they create—and enforce refundable deposit schemes on plastic bottles. Finally, we must actively revive our traditional, plastic-free packaging to replace industrial plastics.

The science is simple: rampant plastic pollution is poisoning us. The presence of microplastics in our primary protein sources and everyday household items is a profound threat to our future. The government must provide the institutional follow-through to enforce its laws and foster sustainable alternatives. Until it does, the 2002 ban will remain a hollow symbol, and the invisible, silent threat inside our bodies will only grow more severe.

The reforms that will shape the true legacy of July uprising



MACRO MIRROR

Dr Fahmida Khatun
is an economist and executive director at the Centre for Policy Dialogue (CPD). Views expressed in this article are the author's own.

FAHMIDA KHATUN

July 2024 is one of the pivotal moments in Bangladesh's history. What started as a student-led protest demanding reform in the quota system for government jobs rapidly grew into a nationwide uprising, culminating in a change of government. Therefore, from a historical perspective, the defining question is why a movement over public sector recruitment transformed into a demand for systemic political change.

The root cause lies in years of accumulated political, economic and institutional grievances. While the quota system provided the initial spark, the underlying factors were far more profound. As with many historic social movements, a particular grievance became a symbol of wider public discontent. The Arab Spring, for instance, began with a Tunisian street vendor's self-immolation but quickly grew into a regional protest against authoritarian rule, unemployment, and inequality. In Bangladesh, the July uprising followed this pattern.

By mid-2024, the country was under increasing economic and political strain. Inflation had risen above 11 percent, and problems such as low investment, sluggish job growth, dwindling reserves, banking sector weaknesses, and underperforming public services heightened economic concerns. Many young people felt increasingly marginalised from employment opportunities and national decision-making. Consequently, the quota issue expanded into a wider discussion about the fairness and legitimacy of state governance.

The July uprising, therefore, symbolised more than just opposition to a specific system. It challenged the country's development approach, which excluded the majority of people from the benefits and had little institutional accountability. Through the movement, the youth expected to create a new social contract that would redefine the relationship between the state and the citizens.

Two years on, the obvious question is whether those expectations have been met. If not, will they be fulfilled in the coming days? The answer hinges on how success is defined. If it is measured only by the transfer of political power, then July signifies a historic milestone. But if success is assessed through institutional reforms, the goal remains unachieved. Judged by progress in employment generation, inflation control, investment growth, steady electricity supply, and improved public services, July's objectives still remain unfulfilled.

July's true legacy will not be measured by the number of reform commissions formed or policies announced. Instead, it will be judged by the nation's ability to build a state in which political rivalry remains peaceful, the economy thrives, institutions are accountable, and citizens' rights are safeguarded. Achieving these goals requires more than immediate stabilisation. It demands sustained institutional and economic reforms.



VISUAL: **SALMAN SAKIB SHAHRYAR**

Restoring confidence in democratic competition is the top priority. The key lesson of July is that when legitimate political contests are limited, public frustration can escalate into protests. Free, credible and well-organised elections are crucial not just for democracy but also for economic stability. Investors need long-term commitments and predictable power transitions through constitutional and peaceful means. To achieve this, strengthening the Election Commission, building trust among political parties, and creating reliable mechanisms for dispute resolution should be national goals.

At the same time, Bangladesh needs to shift from a system in which decisions depend largely on individuals to one in which institutions guide governance. A mature state is characterised by institutions that continue to function professionally and impartially regardless of changes in political leadership. Strengthening the independence, professionalism and accountability of the civil service, judiciary, Bangladesh Bank, Election Commission, Anti-Corruption Commission and other regulatory bodies is therefore essential. Without stronger institutions, sustainable development will remain difficult to achieve.

Economic policy should prioritise employment as a key goal. The country's growth in recent years has relied heavily on RMG exports, remittance inflows, and increased female workforce participation. Moving forward, development must aim to provide meaningful employment for a growing, better-educated youth population. Boosting economic growth alone is not enough. Fostering new industries, promoting technological advancements, diversifying exports, supporting SMEs, and generating skilled jobs must also be policy goals, aligning with young people's ambitions.

A robust financial system is crucial to this end. The banking sector has reached the point where small-scale corrections are no longer sufficient. Addressing challenges such as high non-performing loans, poor governance, insufficient capital, and slow judicial processes demands a wide-ranging reform plan. Improved loan recovery, streamlined financial litigation, proper provisioning, enhanced corporate governance, and greater independence for the central bank are vital for the country's financial system to effectively underpin investment and sustainable economic development.

A comprehensive revenue reform is equally crucial in this journey. Bangladesh's tax-GDP ratio is far below international standards, which constrains the government's ability to invest sufficiently in infrastructure, education, healthcare, and social safety nets. However, increasing revenue means not simply raising taxes but also modernising tax administration, tackling tax evasion, expanding digital tax systems, and establishing a simpler, more equitable tax system. Citizens' willingness to pay taxes will grow only if they trust that public funds are being managed transparently and efficiently.

Energy security must be central to the country's long-term economic strategy. Recent power and gas shortages have constrained industrial growth and reduced investment. Energy policy should be regarded as a key factor influencing industrial competitiveness, exports, jobs, and foreign investment, not just power generation. In the short term, Bangladesh should focus on supplying gas and electricity to productive sectors, diversifying energy import sources, and settling outstanding supplier payments on time. For the medium and long terms, initiatives like boosting domestic gas exploration, expanding renewable energy sources, enhancing regional power trade, and developing an integrated energy security plan are vital for sustainable development.

Decentralisation must be another important reform goal. The highly centralised system in Bangladesh often hampers timely responses to local issues and restricts citizen involvement. Empowering local authorities would strengthen democracy and improve service delivery in several public sectors. Decentralising decision-making would foster greater accountability and improve development results as well.

Tackling inequality must also be a key focus of development policy. A major message from July was that economic growth by itself isn't sufficient; equitable distribution of its advantages is equally crucial. Addressing regional disparities, unequal access to quality education, gender gaps in employment, digital divides, and limited opportunities for young people are essential for ensuring that economic progress remains socially sustainable.

These reforms must be based on strong evidence. Successful policymaking relies on accurate data, thorough research, and systematic evaluation, not just political judgment. Increased collaboration among government bodies, universities, research organisations, and the private sector would enhance both the quality of public policy and public trust in government decisions.

What the July uprising truly symbolised was a deeper desire to see the state go beyond regulation to serve as the protector of citizens' rights, security and opportunities. A modern social contract should be based on three core principles: accountability, equal opportunity, and trust. When citizens feel that the state treats them fairly, upholds their rights equally under the law, and manages public resources wisely, both democratic stability and economic growth become much more sustainable.

For women, a degree must build a vision, not just a biodata



Shimu Akhter
is a law student based in Dhaka, working on gender justice and human rights.

SHIMU AKHTER

Every year, Bangladesh proudly celebrates its rising female literacy rate. On paper, we are a success story. From urban university campuses to colleges in rural districts, classrooms are full of ambitious, hardworking young women. They study till late, pass their exams, and graduate with degrees.

But behind these inspiring statistics also exists a heartbreaking reality. When I speak to many of these educated women, in cities and villages alike, and ask them what they plan to do with their hard-earned knowledge, I am often met with a blank stare. There is no plan or destination. Their years of academic toil were spent not with the intention to build a personal future, but to enhance a portfolio or biodata for the marriage market.

Education for many women has largely been hijacked, reduced to an item to check off a list of traits which make a girl a more "attractive" bride.

We are all taught a simple, universal proverb from our earliest days in primary school: "A life without a goal is like a ship without a rudder." We memorise this phrase to secure marks on our exams, yet we fail completely to apply it in the case of half our population. We are launching millions of educated ships into the sea of life while actively denying them a rudder. This systemic visionlessness is a double-sided tragedy, and both sides, parents and young women themselves, share the guilt.

Even when a young girl harbours a genuine ambition to be well-educated, her family often dampens it. They treat her degree almost as a transaction. To such families, a daughter's education is not a path towards her self-actualisation or financial security, but an investment to raise the family's social standing in the matrimonial market.

However, young women also learn and reinforce this stereotype. When we accept a life without a vision, we surrender our own power. Many settle into the comfortable illusion that a husband's income is a permanent safety net.

But that illusion shatters as domestic reality dawns on them. In Bangladesh, why has high female literacy not brought a proportional drop in domestic violence? When abuse starts, a woman without a vision and without a sense of her own capability feels utterly paralysed.

To be clear, this is not an argument against one choosing to be a homemaker. Homemaking is a valid, respectable choice. This is an argument about women's mental freedom and independent survival.

Even when a young girl harbours a genuine ambition to be well-educated, her family often dampens it. They treat her degree almost as a transaction. To such families, a daughter's education is not a path towards her self-actualisation or financial security, but an investment to raise the family's social standing in the matrimonial market.

Too many educated women feel culturally obligated to put up with physical and emotional abuse as they have been conditioned to believe they are incapable of surviving on their own. They hold degrees, yet they look at the world outside and think, "I cannot earn my own bread and butter." They stay in toxic, abusive marriages because they lack the confidence to use the very tools they spent years studying to acquire.

But one's education is their shield against the ills of the world. If a traditional job is not possible, an educated woman today has other avenues open to her: she can run a business from home, teach, consult, and build a livelihood in many ways. She already has the capability to do this. What she lacks is the mental permission to believe in her own agency.

Parents must stop raising their daughters to be decorative, credentialed trophies. They must ask their daughters, "What is your vision for your life?" rather than focusing on what kind of husband they want for her.

Young women of Bangladesh must not let their hard work be reduced to a single line on a biodata. They must find their rudder and determine their own vision. A woman who possesses a vision for her own life ceases to feel inferior and gains the power to walk away from any situation where her dignity is compromised.

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/