Girls are winning the exam race but losing the career race



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The numbers from this year's Secondary School Certificate (SSC) and equivalent examinations tell a striking story about Bangladesh's girls. Like in the past eight years, female students have once again outperformed their male counterparts in SSC examinations, and this year the gap widened substantially: the pass rate among girls is 66.68 percent, while that among boys is 57.86 percent, a difference of 8.82 percentage points. Girls also secured 63,896 GPA-5 results, compared to 52,780 among boys. In absolute numbers, 607,939 female candidates passed, compared to 530,938 male candidates, even though more boys had sat for the exams.

Despite these encouraging figures, it remains a puzzle why girls' educational advantage does not translate proportionately into better employment opportunities, higher incomes, greater professional advancement, and stronger representation in leadership.

Bangladesh has made remarkable progress in girls' education, moving from a situation in which girls were significantly disadvantaged in accessing education to one in which they have achieved, and in many respects exceeded, educational parity (particularly at the primary level). Yet, the transition from education to economic participation remains deeply unequal. According to the final report of the latest Labour Force Survey, labour force participation rate among women was 38.40 percent while that among men was 79.96 percent in 2024. In absolute terms, only 2.29 crore women were employed in 2024, in contrast to 4.62 crore men. In other words, employment among men exceeded that of women by more than two crores. Besides, female employment has been decreasing since 2022. So why are girls, despite being successful at the beginning of their educational journey, increasingly falling out of the pipeline before reaching the most economically and institutionally powerful stages in their lives?

One of the reasons is undoubtedly family responsibility. This should not be understood simply as a private choice made by women. The BBS conducted the country's first Time-Use Survey in 2021 and found that women spend an average of 11.7 hours a day on domestic and care work, compared with 1.6 hours for men, which is less than seven times that of women. This unequal burden impacts women's careers, as time spent on unpaid domestic and care work is time that could otherwise be used for paid employment, professional development, and career advancement.

The problem is not a shortage of talented women. Their consistent success in examinations demonstrates that clearly. Rather, the rules which determine success change. At school, individual effort and academic performance are heavily rewarded. In professional life, success also depends on uninterrupted career trajectories, mobility, networks, time, and institutional support. If those resources are distributed unequally, educational equality cannot produce equal outcomes.

The lack of childcare centres nationwide is a crucial barrier to women's advancement. Bangladesh has only 63 publicly funded childcare centres nationwide, run by the Department of Women Affairs under the Ministry of Women and Children Affairs. Private centres also exist, but many remain too expensive for low- and middle-income families. A 2024 study conducted to develop the government's "Roadmap for Childcare in Bangladesh" revealed that 54 percent of parents identified inadequate childcare as a major barrier to workforce participation. Furthermore, among the women who participated in the survey, 18 percent had left their jobs, 34 percent reported lower job performance, and 13 percent had turned down job offers because of childcare constraints.



Female students have once again outperformed their male counterparts in SSC examinations, and this year the gap widened substantially. FILE PHOTO: PRABIR DAS

For women, a career break is rarely just a temporary pause. Time away from work can mean missing out on experience, professional networks, and opportunities for promotion. When a woman leaves her job to care for her family, she may return to find that her colleagues have moved ahead while her own career stagnated. As a result, the same family responsibility, for which men are not taking leave, can affect men's and women's careers very differently.

But family responsibility alone does not explain the gap between male and female employment. According to Bangladesh Sample Vital Statistics 2022, among Bangladeshis aged 15 to 24 years, 61.71 percent of women versus 18.59 percent of men are not in education, employment, or training (NEET). A gap of this size suggests that structural barriers and social expectations matter as much as individual choice, even before marriage or motherhood become factors.

Women also often face restrictions on mobility, concerns about workplace safety, occupational segregation, and discrimination. While some portion of the NEET data may reflect individual preference, when the disparity in NEET is this large and seen this early in terms of age, preference alone cannot explain it. So instead of asking why girls cannot shine later in life, we should try to answer why society captures less of the potential that girls demonstrate so clearly when in school.

The problem is not a shortage of talented women. Their consistent success in examinations demonstrates that clearly. Nor do men suddenly become more capable after leaving school. Rather, the rules which determine success change. At school, individual effort and academic performance are heavily rewarded. In professional life, success also depends on uninterrupted career trajectories, mobility, networks, time, and institutional support. If those resources are distributed unequally, educational equality cannot produce equal outcomes.

This matters as an economic issue, not only as a question of gender justice. When an educated woman leaves the labour market prematurely, Bangladesh loses more than her individual income. It loses part of the return on the educational investment made by her family, community, and state. That is why childcare should not be treated as a family matter alone, because affordable and accessible childcare enables parents, particularly mothers, to participate in the labour market. Bangladesh needs to treat childcare as part of its economic and employment infrastructure, not simply as a welfare service.

The government should expand affordable childcare beyond the existing 63 centres, ensure that employers comply with the childcare requirements under Section 94 of the Labour Act, 2006, create opportunities for women to return to work after career breaks, and make workplaces and transportation safer for women. Besides, a fairer sharing of unpaid domestic work within households is necessary.

The solution is not simply to tell girls to study harder. They are already doing so. The challenge is to ensure that they can retain their performance throughout their academic journey and into their careers as adults. Bangladesh has already demonstrated that it can change the educational trajectory of an entire generation of girls. We must now ensure that the girl who wins the examination race does not become the woman who is forced to withdraw from the career race. The real measure of Bangladesh's success will not be how many girls top the board examination at age 15 or 16; it will be how many of them are still thriving, earning, leading, and making decisions 20 years later.

We must bring AI to the factory floor

RMG NOTES



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Bangladesh built its garment industry on scale, competitive labour costs, and the ability to supply large volumes of basic apparel. But this model is now under serious pressure. Wages, energy prices, and financing costs have risen; buyers expect shorter lead times and smaller orders; and the country's planned graduation from Least Developed Country (LDC) status will gradually reduce many trade advantages.

The next competitive edge for Bangladesh is unlikely to come from being cheaper alone. It should rather stem from becoming faster, more accurate, more flexible, and more innovative. Artificial intelligence (AI) could help deliver such a shift. In an industry where sewing remains difficult to fully automate, the biggest near-term gains may come from using AI to improve the thousands of decisions surrounding production.

One of the most immediate applications could be production planning. Many of our factories still rely heavily on spreadsheets and experience to allocate orders, balance sewing lines, and estimate completion dates. An AI-based system could analyse order specifications, standard minute values, worker skills, machine availability, and previous production data to recommend the most efficient line plan. It could recalculate schedules when fabric arrives late, a machine breaks down, or a buyer changes an order.

This would give factories a more accurate picture of capacity and reduce the risk of accepting orders they cannot deliver profitably. Faster planning could also help suppliers compete for shorter-run and higher-value business, rather than depending on large, predictable orders. Quality control is another high-value opportunity. Cameras placed above fabric inspection machines, cutting tables, or sewing lines could be trained to identify holes, stains, shade variation, skipped stitches, print misalignment, and incorrect seams. The aim would not be to remove human inspectors, but to alert them earlier and direct their attention to potential problems. A defect detected at the end of production may affect thousands of garments. However, the same defect identified early could be confined to a few pieces. Better in-line detection could reduce rework, shipment rejection, and costly airfreight while strengthening buyer confidence.

AI could also support predictive maintenance. Sensors fitted to knitting, dyeing, cutting, sewing, and finishing equipment can be used to monitor vibration, temperature, pressure, and electricity use. Machine-learning systems, meanwhile, can identify abnormal patterns and warn engineers before a failure stops production. Preventing even a few hours of downtime can protect margins and shipment dates.

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Energy and resource efficiency offer a related advantage. AI can compare production schedules with real-time electricity, gas, steam, and water use, highlighting machines or processes which are consuming more than expected. In dyeing and finishing, algorithms could optimise recipes and process settings, reducing repeated batches, chemical use, and water consumption.

A further opportunity is in design and product development. Generative AI and 3D tools can turn a buyer brief into initial concepts, prints, virtual samples and draft technical specifications. When used by designers and merchandisers, these tools can shorten development cycles and reduce physical sampling. China is already showing what can look like in practice. For instance, down-apparel group Bosideng has worked with Zhejiang University to create an AI model for design and product development. The company says it has cut prototype development time from 100 days to 27 and reduced sample costs by more than 60 percent. At its smart factory, an AI "brain" reportedly connects nearly 2,000 devices, while a jacket can move from raw fabric to finished product in three to four minutes. China is also deploying AI beyond design. In Hai'an, Jiangsu province, AI visual-inspection systems have entered trials at nine textile companies.

Chinese company DataBeyond has meanwhile developed an AI-enabled textile-sorting machine capable of processing around two tonnes of used clothing per hour. Its operator says the technology reduced the proportion of material classed as unrecyclable from 50 to 30 percent. These examples illustrate how China is combining AI with machinery, industrial data, research institutions and government policy.

Changshu, an apparel cluster containing more than 5,000 textile businesses, has even issued a white paper promoting AI-led upgrading, while China's wider "AI Plus" initiative aims to embed the technology across traditional industries. National and local governments are also supporting robotics through funds, subsidies, public procurement, and shared data facilities.

Bangladesh does not need to copy China's capital-intensive model wholesale. Our advantage could lie in deploying practical, lower-cost AI around existing workers and machinery. Encouragingly, there are signs that this transition has begun. The BGMEA says larger Bangladeshi suppliers are investing in advanced machinery, enterprise resource planning systems and AI tools for production planning and quality control. Some factories are using AI to optimise fabric cutting to improve forecasting. Industry leaders have nevertheless warned that adoption must accelerate if Bangladesh is to preserve its competitiveness after LDC graduation.

Government support is essential, particularly for smaller manufacturers unable to afford large technology teams or risky pilot projects. A dedicated RMG AI programme could offer matching grants for factory trials, concessional finance for sensors and inspection equipment, and accelerated depreciation or tax credits for qualifying investments. Bangladesh's draft National AI Policy already proposes tax incentives and accelerated depreciation for eligible private AI investment.

The government could also establish shared "AI factory labs" with business organisations, universities and technology providers. Factories could test quality-control cameras, planning software and energy-management systems before committing substantial capital. Data is hugely important for our sector. An industry data trust could allow anonymised information on defects, machine failures, energy consumption, and production bottlenecks to be pooled securely. This would help developers train systems around the realities of Bangladesh's garment production rather than relying solely on overseas datasets.

The government could further support deployment by bringing brands into the process. Buyers who demand shorter lead times, better traceability, and increasingly detailed environmental data could be encouraged to co-finance technology pilots with suppliers. This would prevent the full cost of digital upgrading being pushed onto factories already operating on thin margins.

Finally, implementation includes workers. Operators, inspectors, engineers and production managers need training to understand AI outputs, identify errors and improve the systems. Government-funded programmes should prioritise women, who account for a substantial part of the RMG workforce but may be excluded from advanced technical training. AI will not remove Bangladesh's structural challenges. But used intelligently, it could help factories quote faster, plan more accurately, waste less, improve quality, and offer buyers greater visibility.

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Invitation For e-Tender

For financial year 2026-2027, e-Tender is invited in the National e-GP system portal (www.eprocure.gov.bd) for the procurement of:

SL	Tender ID No & Reference No	Descripton of goods	Last selling date & time	Closing/Opening Date & Time
1.	1317668, RAB-6/6300/03/Q(Ration)/2026-2027/02 Date: 29/6/2026	Edible Oil (S/oil) - 1st Quarter	23 August 2026 11:00	23 August 2026 14:00

This is an online tender, where only e-tender will be accepted in the national e-GP portal and no offline/hard copies will be accepted.

To submit e-tender, registration in the national e-GP system portal (www.eprocure.gov.bd) is required.

The fees for downloading the e-tender documents from the national e-GP system portal have to be deposited online through any registered bank branches.

Further information and guidelines are available in the national e-GP system portal and from e-GP helpdesk (helpdesk@eprocure.gov.bd).

Tender having clarity requirements are requested to contact at 017777-10608 (Senior Assistant Director, RAB-6, Khulna)

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