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

Childcare key to our economic progress

Make it affordable, accessible, and adequate for working mothers

Bangladesh has seen a significant rise in women's employment in both the formal and informal sectors since independence. It is part of the country's development success story. Yet, in recent times, with the rise of nuclear families, many women have to drop out of the workforce because of the lack of daycare facilities for their young children. Unlike many other countries, Bangladesh has not developed a strong, affordable daycare system that can support working mothers. Needless to say, this is not only a step backwards for women's empowerment but also a major obstacle to the nation's economic progress.

Around 2.36 crore women are in the labour force, as per the 2024 Labour Force Survey, but there are currently only 64 government daycare centres, with the capacity to serve around 4,000 children. This glaring gap between the number of working women and the number of state-run daycare centres is exacerbated by the fact that private daycare remains unaffordable for the majority. Moreover, given the prevailing crisis, getting a place at a government daycare centre can take months. Some of these centres are located within institutions (such as the Secretariat complex) that are not accessible to the general public. There is also a lack of information about the other centres, and many parents simply do not know they exist.

The long waiting lists at daycare centres point to the high demand for affordable childcare facilities. At around 44 centres, low-income families can get childcare services for as little as Tk 100 per month, while middle-income families pay around Tk 500, with additional admission fees. But due to the limited number of seats and centres, most working mothers are forced to use expensive private daycare facilities.

The long waiting lists at daycare centres point to the high demand for affordable childcare facilities. At around 44 centres, low-income families can get childcare services for as little as Tk 100 per month, while middle-income families pay around Tk 500, with additional admission fees. But due to the limited number of seats and centres, most working mothers are forced to use expensive private daycare facilities. According to our report, private daycare can cost as much as Tk 6,000 to over Tk 9,000 per month for one child. The number of public daycare centres, therefore, must be increased substantially, especially in areas with high concentrations of working women. The proposed 150 new centres must be set up as soon as possible.

The government, moreover, should encourage private-sector employers to provide daycare facilities on their own premises. Such initiatives will help expand the number of facilities without placing the entire burden on the state. All daycare centres, however, must meet minimum standards for safety, hygiene, nutrition, staffing, and facilitating early childhood development, with regular monitoring and inspection by authorities. Childcare workers should receive proper training and decent wages. The government must also maintain a national database of daycare centres with all relevant information so that parents can easily find these services.

Affordable childcare is a crucial part of the infrastructure needed for a modern economy. The government must recognise this reality and commit to greater investment in childcare facilities to ensure that women do not have to drop out of the workforce.

Factories must stop polluting rivers

Govt should crack down on industries flouting ETP rules

As the political promises of planting 25 crore trees and digging 20,000 kilometres of canals and waterways are reiterated at review meetings and conferences, marginalised sections of our population continue to suffer multiple types of environmental pollution daily. As a report by this daily outlines, the canals in Gazipur's industrial areas remain pitch-black as industrial and household waste flow through the Tongi canal into Turag and Balu rivers. Not only is the water uninhabitable for aquatic life, but the land around these waterways is also not conducive to farming crops. Besides, chemicals evaporate, polluting the air, corroding tin roofs and, more concerningly, affecting the health of residents. Meanwhile, in Narsingdi, a similar story of waste plagues the Haridhoa River. Here, too, the river is encroached upon and is polluted by chemical waste from surrounding industries.

In both Gazipur and Narsingdi, industries pollute nearby water bodies despite having effluent treatment plants (ETP). While a number of factories, including Leeds-certified ones run their ETPs properly, many others do not. Consequently, it impacts public health. Tests of surface water along the Turag have found lead, cadmium, chromium, nickel, and iron above permissible levels by local and global standards. Some samples recorded pH levels as low as 2 to 4, indicating highly acidic water. In some locations, the concentration of dissolved heavy metals such as iron, lead, chromium, and nickel is alarmingly high. Near the Haridhoa, locals avoid getting into the water, while those who still bathe in it often develop skin problems. The Narsingdi Sadar Hospital reportedly receives 14 to 16 patients a day with diseases caused by the river pollution.

Most concerningly, there is a severe shortage of workforce to monitor these industries and their pollution. In Gazipur district, for instance, the Department of Environment (DoE) office responsible has five staff members, only three of whom are inspectors. Meanwhile, a Tk 6.5-crore project under the Narsingdi Water Development Board to excavate the Haridhoa has only reached 15 percent completion since it began last August.

We cannot allow life-giving rivers to be choked by reckless human-made corruption. Beyond individual-level plastic pollution, the government must treat industrial pollution as an emergency because it affects the daily lives of crores of people nationwide. Rivers must be revived and kept pollution-free to help life flourish as they have done for centuries.

Paperless by December? Ctg port must get the transition right



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Chattogram port recently set an ambitious target to become "fully paperless" by December 2026. This is a direction we must welcome. For the country's principal maritime gateway, digitalisation is essential to reducing transaction times, improving transparency, and supporting a trading economy that can no longer afford unnecessary administrative friction.

On September 23, the Chittagong Port Authority (CPA) announced a package of initiatives to accelerate this transition. Container and consignee bills will be generated and collected entirely through the Terminal Operating System (TOS); online payments will be available round the clock; e-gate passes, and gate-in and gate-out operations will be fully online; and time-slot management, online cart tickets, e-gate challans, and vessel e-NOCs will be incorporated into the TOS. Special Delivery Assignments will be approved online through the TOS, while auction deliveries will be facilitated through the National Board of Revenue (NBR)/Customs API integration. As part of the package, the One-Stop Service Centre will also facilitate integration with inland container depots (ICDs).

Technologically, all this represents considerable progress. But an incident only a day earlier offered an equally important lesson about what digitalisation requires.

On September 22, a new payment arrangement requiring port users to make payments through Eastern Bank triggered protests from importers, exporters, and customs clearing and forwarding agents. Many businesses did not maintain accounts with the designated bank, and cargo clearance activities were reportedly disrupted for several hours before the port authority withdrew the arrangement. Port users also raised concerns about difficulties with parts of the TOS.

I mention this episode not as an argument against digitalisation. Rather, it shows why digital systems must be designed around the transactions users actually need to complete. A system may work technically and still create operational difficulties if the underlying business process has not been properly designed. Technology can otherwise replace one source of friction with another.

Chattogram port has already travelled some distance in terms of digitalisation. In February, it launched the platform "CPA Sky," intended to bring port, customs, and related export-import services onto an integrated platform. In July, CPA announced that import cargo-delivery documentation—from Delivery Order application to final gate-out—had been brought under the upgraded TOS, including integration with NBR's ASYCUDA World customs system.

So, the foundations for digitalisation and automation are increasingly in place. The more difficult phase now begins—adoption.

Installing software is different from changing the behaviour of the many people, platforms, and organisations using a port every day. Clearing and forwarding agents, shipping agents, importers, exporters, freight forwarders, truck operators, banks, customs officials, and port employees have developed working practices over decades. So when a digital procedure becomes mandatory, users need to know what happens if, for instance, a payment fails, or an approval does not appear, or one system does not recognise information entered into another. Such failures can hold up a container and trigger storage charges, detention, demurrage, missed production schedules, or missed export shipments.

The upcoming December target should, therefore, be viewed not just as a deadline for switching systems on, but as a transition-management deadline for the entire port community.

Training and awareness are part of the digital infrastructure itself. CPA could conduct hands-on sessions for different user groups, establish temporary digital transition desks, issue short Bangla and English video demonstrations, and strengthen help-desk support during the migration. Where feasible, the digital channel should become visibly quicker and easier than the manual one.

System reliability is equally important. Once paper disappears, the digital platform becomes critical infrastructure. Major services should have measurable standards for availability, response times, payment confirmation, and help desk resolution, together with a clear contingency protocol so that traders are not penalised when the system—not the trader—causes a delay.

There is another prerequisite: regulatory readiness. A paperless operation cannot be achieved simply by switching on digital modules if rules, manuals, forms, or standing instructions still assume physical documents, signatures, stamps, or registers. Bangladesh already provides broad legal recognition for electronic records, and the Customs Act allows customs functions to be carried out electronically under prescribed procedures. But CPA should review its regulations, manuals, standing orders, and forms together with the relevant customs requirements, transaction by transaction.

Such a review should distinguish three things—requirements that need formal legal or regulatory amendment, procedures that can be changed administratively, and paper practices that survive simply through institutional habit. Unless all three are addressed, digital systems may coexist with paper rather than replace it.

Success must also be measured from the user's side. Counting how many services are "online" does not show whether a port has truly become paperless. Better questions are: how many physical visits are still required? How many documents must still be printed? How often is information re-entered? How long does a digital transaction take? How frequently is manual intervention needed?

This leads to a broader distinction: a paperless port is not necessarily the same as paperless trade. CPA can digitise almost every procedure within the port boundary, while an importer may still move between customs, a bank, a shipping line, regulatory agencies, and other service providers. True paperless trade emerges only when authorised information can move electronically and securely among them.

Bangladesh's broader performance illustrates this challenge. The 2025 UN Global Survey on Digital and Sustainable Trade Facilitation records Bangladesh's paperless-trade implementation at 70.37 percent, but cross-border paperless trade at only 33.33 percent; the electronic single-window system was assessed as partially implemented.

The next frontier is, therefore, interoperability. CPA's TOS and CPA Sky should progressively be integrated with NBR's ASYCUDA World and the Bangladesh Single Window, as well as with banks, shipping lines, ICDs, off-docks, and other relevant regulatory systems. Information already supplied electronically to one authorised agency should, where the law and data governance arrangements permit, not have to be printed and submitted again elsewhere.

Chattogram port is closer to this objective than before, and the December deadline to go paperless can become an important milestone. But declaring a system digital and making a port genuinely paperless are different. A truly paperless port is one where there are no unnecessary procedures, information is entered once and reused securely, users rarely need to visit an office, and digital transactions are easier than the paper processes they replace. Technology can make that possible but legal and regulatory alignment, interoperability, user readiness, and well-designed processes will determine whether paper actually disappears from CPA.



'Declaring a system digital and making a port genuinely paperless are different.' PHOTO: **RAJIB RAIHAN**

Growth must not come at the cost of lives



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Let me start with some sorry statistics on deaths in Bangladesh. On average, road crashes claim more than 30,000 lives every year. It is estimated that more than 2.5 lakh people die prematurely due to air pollution, contaminated water, poor sanitation and hygiene, and lead poisoning every year. As I am writing this, the death toll of children from measles in the latest outbreak has crossed 1100, and counting.

One of them is Tajim, who was a test-tube baby, born after 11 years of marriage. His mother, Farzana, has been trying to find solace through posting about her son on Facebook. Let me now remind you of Abul Kalam Azad, whose life was cut short by a metro rail bearing pad failure, or the tear-jerking letter from 8-year-old Zayma to her friend Hiya, who lost her life to dengue. These incidents touched the souls of thousands, something mere statistics cannot contain. In fact, countless stories remain hidden from public eyes behind each of the statistics mentioned above. Stories of aspiration, struggle, love, and desire to live.

Ask any ordinary Bangladeshi whether they feel secure in their lives, and it is highly unlikely their answer would be "yes". We live in a state of constant anxiety, knowing any one of our loved ones can turn into a statistic or a news headline. It seems that death is lurking in every corner, with its different faces, waiting to cut our lives short.

Philosopher Martha Nussbaum lists 10 central capabilities that every human being should enjoy regardless of their identities. Guess which one is at the top? Life, the capability to live a human life of normal length; not experience premature death, or die before reaching a life so reduced that it is not worth living. The Universal Declaration of Human Rights recognises the right to life as a fundamental right in Article 3. Our constitution protects this fundamental right in Article 32.

Bangladesh has a remarkable history of reducing child mortality and ensuring widespread access to primary healthcare, which has raised the country's average life expectancy to around 75 years. Yet, a cursory reading of newspapers and the statistics I mentioned at the beginning illustrates that a considerable number of citizens die prematurely, with a significant number from preventable causes. Why are we not able to save these lives? As the protector of the right to live for all, can the state absolve itself of the duty of guarding every citizen's life?

A fundamental problem here is the mindset of not valuing every human life equally and normalising premature death by the state authorities and political bodies. Take the case of road crashes, for instance. Experts suggest that using the term "accident", rather than "crash", hints at a sense of "inevitability", masking the real reasons behind the death of thousands, including poor road design and maintenance, weak enforcement of laws under the pressure of politically influential transport owners and workers' unions, and an appalling system of payment per trip for the drivers that encourages deadly, cut-throat competition. Even after the horrific shooting of Sharif Osman Hadi, the Chief Election Commissioner made an extremely insensitive remark that "one or two murders happen occasionally" during every election season. This culture of devaluing human lives while absolving authorities of their responsibilities reflects the fragile state of accountability of the governing bodies in our country.

This is not to say that we don't require economic development. But matters concerning human lives and wellbeing should be the driving force behind that development.

Another reason lies in the fetishisation of growth and economic development by the policy environment, rather than prioritising human lives and well-being. Using the example of road crashes again, it is evident that the focus is on implementing mega-projects, such as building bridges and roads that are strong, visible symbols of development with greater political currency. In contrast, ensuring road safety requires continuous effort, with improvements that are incremental, which does not help political parties much in showcasing their performance. Similarly, reducing air pollution, along with other environmental issues, remains at the bottom of the barrel in the policy circle. Jeopardising human lives is thus considered a necessary cost of economic growth, which, to borrow from Amartya Sen, is not an end in itself but only a means to human wellbeing.

This is not to say that we don't require economic development. But matters concerning human lives and wellbeing should be the driving force behind that development. The transport and communication sector has received the largest allocation in Bangladesh's Annual Development Programme (ADP) over the years, with rapid economic growth cited as a major goal. But this does not have a strong road safety component, a classic example of the deprioritisation of human lives and wellbeing.

We don't want a state that devalues human lives, where children die because of dilly-dallying with vaccine purchase and a broken healthcare system, where we experience premature death by merely breathing the air. The state authorities need to recognise that every human life is priceless. The state must become our true custodian. We also want policies centred around human lives and wellbeing. We want our capability to live. A life worth living as citizens.

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/