Women face political barriers long before polls

Speakers say at Bay of Bengal Conversation

STAFF CORRESPONDENT

Women face barriers to entering politics long before election day, from securing party nominations and campaign funds to dealing with physical and online harassment, speakers said yesterday.

"If we wait until election day to count how many women have won, it's way too late," said Stephen Rodriques, resident representative of UNDP Bangladesh, at a session titled "Who Gets to Lead? Women, Local Power, and the Future of Democratic Governance" at the Bay of Bengal Conversation 2026 in Dhaka.

He said the process was shaped much earlier by who was encouraged to enter politics, could rise within political parties, received training and support, secured nominations and felt safe enough to remain in politics.

Rezwana Karim Snigdha, professor of anthropology at Jahangirnagar University, said political parties often focused on a candidate's "winnability", while women had fewer opportunities to build the networks needed to succeed in politics.

She said women also faced physical and digital harassment, with online attacks often targeting their appearance, family roles and personal lives.

Rezwana added that such abuse deterred other women from entering politics.

She also identified money as a major barrier, saying women had less access to the resources needed to contest elections.

Election Commissioner Abul Fazal Md Sanaullah said local government elections were no longer held under party banners, creating greater scope for women to participate.

He added that the electoral code of conduct had also been revised to address violence against women and gender-based cyberbullying.

Md Abdul Alim, a former member of the Electoral Reform Commission, called for effective quotas, gender policies within political parties and public funding for women candidates.

UN Women Country Representative in Bangladesh Gitanjali Singh said meaningful representation of women in leadership was a democratic imperative.



Distinguished speakers attend a session, titled "The Democracy Conversation: Rebuilding Trust in An Age of Polarisation", on the second day of the three-day 2026 Bay of Bengal Conversation at Pan Pacific Sonargaon Hotel in Dhaka yesterday.

PHOTO: COURTESY OF BAY OF BENGAL CONVERSATION

No significant media reform despite pledges

Says Matiur Rahman, criticises treatment of the press under Hasina and Yunus regimes

STAFF CORRESPONDENT

Criticising the two previous governments led by deposed prime minister Sheikh Hasina and former chief adviser Muhammad Yunus over their treatment of the media, Prothom Alo Editor Matiur Rahman yesterday said the current BNP government had taken no significant steps to reform the sector despite its election pledges.



He, however, lauded previous BNP administrations under Khaleda Zia for granting "considerable freedom" to the press.

Speaking at a session titled "Journalism After the Turning Point" at the Bay of Bengal Conversation, he reminded the ruling party of its 31-point reform programme and election manifesto, which promised a media commission, the repeal of restrictive laws, and protection for "fearless, impartial journalism".

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UK, EU want strategic partnership with Dhaka

Say envoys of UK and European Union

STAFF CORRESPONDENT

The heads of the United Kingdom and the European Union missions said they are looking to move beyond the traditional donor-recipient relationship and are viewing Bangladesh as a strategic partner.

EU Ambassador Michael Miller and UK High Commissioner to Bangladesh Sarah Cooke were addressing the Bay of Bengal Conversation organised by the Centre for Governance Studies yesterday.

Both outlined plans for free trade arrangements with Bangladesh as the country moves up from the Least Developed Country status.

"Today, our relationship has matured into a modern, strategic partnership, one that reflects Bangladesh's growing global role. As Bangladesh continues to prepare for graduation from Least Developed Country status, our focus is on supporting a transition that is both smooth and sustained," said Cooke.

The envoy said Bangladesh currently benefits from duty-free access to the UK market for 99.8 percent of product lines under the UK's Developing Countries Trading Scheme and would continue to do so for a three-year transition period following LDC graduation.

"And after that, 92 percent of product lines will remain duty-free, including ready-made garments," she said.

Cooke also said the UK was working with Bangladesh to "unlock greater climate finance and develop high-integrity carbon markets, helping channel investment towards the country's long-term resilience."

She said Bangladesh had "custodial responsibilities" in the Bay of Bengal, which was a "region of increasing strategic importance" and stressed the importance of a free and open Indo-Pacific.

The EU wants its future economic engagement with Bangladesh to be "balanced, reciprocal, and mutually beneficial", said Miller.

The bloc is ready to match Bangladesh's "speed and ambition", including by exploring a future free trade agreement, said the envoy.

Referring to the EU's Everything But Arms trade preference scheme, the ambassador said it had helped underpin Bangladesh's development and contributed to lifting millions of people, including women, out of poverty.

He added that deeper economic ties would also depend on accountable institutions, the rule of law, respect for labour and human rights, environmental protection and good governance. "These issues are essential. They are not peripheral."

As Bangladesh moves beyond LDC status, he highlighted the need for a skilled workforce, diversified exports, stronger infrastructure, and public administration reforms.

Miller said the EU sought to combine European investment with technology, standards, innovation and long-term capital, while maintaining its emphasis on values and institutional safeguards.

Greater foreign and domestic investment and meaningful jobs for young people would also require stronger institutions and greater accountability, he said.

The three-day conference is being held at the Pan Pacific Sonargaon Hotel.

'We are bad at building democratic institutions'

Says Mahfuz Anam

STAFF CORRESPONDENT

Bangladesh has a proven track record of rising against and bringing down dictatorships but has struggled to build a sustainable democracy, said Mahfuz Anam, editor and publisher of The Daily Star.

"We are so good at dismantling dictatorships, but the tragic reality is that we are so bad at building democratic institutions," he said at the Bay of Bengal Conversation, organised by the Centre for Governance Studies yesterday.



"When dismantling a dictatorship, the nation unites, but once the dictatorship is dismantled, the nation divides. The very groups who worked together to dismantle the dictatorship then become each other's enemies," Anam said.

"We really don't know how to bring people together, with all their energy, all their innovation, all their resilience, and turn that resource into national strength," he said.

Anam said the birth of Bangladesh itself was the result of an uprising against a brutal military dictatorship.

"But then we failed to develop a democracy in Bangladesh, and then there was a military uprising. Ershad was the last one to fall, and we returned to democracy in 1991, and we really hoped that this would be the rebirth of democracy in Bangladesh," he said.

Since then, Bangladesh has held some fair elections under caretaker governments, but those arrangements did not last, he said.

"Instead of institutionalising fair elections, we got more and more into conflicts, rivalries and then destruction," Anam said.

He said Bangladesh had failed to institutionalise democratic structures because "we have over-politicised every institution imaginable".

"This over-politicisation has corroded the effectiveness of almost all our institutions," he said.

He said almost every profession in Bangladesh was politically divided along party lines. This ranged from doctors, who are expected to serve everyone, to journalists, for whom non-partisanship is essential to credibility.

"In a profession where credibility is

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Homes take another hit

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BERC reviews LPG prices in the first week of every month based on global prices and import-related costs.

Before the latest global price pressures, the regulated price stood at Tk 1,306 per 12kg cylinder in January. It rose by Tk 387 and Tk 212 in April and May respectively as international LPG prices increased.

Prof M Shamsul Alam, energy adviser to the Consumers Association of Bangladesh, said BERC never properly examines shipping costs and simply accepts businesses' proposals.

"If international LPG prices and shipping costs increase, there is no question that prices may have to rise. The question is: by how much, and how will that increase be determined?" he said.

Shamsul said the law requires prices to be set after a public hearing, which BERC has ignored. The regulator has also failed to enforce its own orders and ensure competition among importers, he added.

"With the latest adjustment, BERC has again shown it is protecting unscrupulous businesses and keeping LPG licence holders beyond accountability," he said.

Opposition Jamaat-e-Islami Secretary General Mia Golam Porwar yesterday condemned the price hike, calling for its immediate withdrawal.

Alleging that syndicates were controlling the market, he said, "Money will end up in the pockets of ministers, leaders, their sons and daughters, relatives, friends and associates.

"Prices will be raised here, mega projects will be awarded there -- all kinds of arrangements are being made to generate income."

Govt employees

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the delay for MPO institutions, specifically madrasas and technical schools, to manual payroll calculation processes, which have held up the circular.

As of 2025, there are 5.87 lakh MPO-affiliated teachers and employees, including 4.32 lakh teachers, according to data from the Bangladesh Bureau of Educational Information and Statistics, the central government agency under the education ministry responsible for collecting, storing, and disseminating education statistics and information.

Meanwhile, the secretary-level committee failed to resolve the implementation of the new pay structure based on recommendations for the judiciary.

Consequently, a separate cabinet committee, chaired by the finance minister, was formed.

The Judicial Service Pay Commission recommended raising the judicial allowance to 100 percent of basic pay, up from the current 30 percent, along with additional perks.

Once the cabinet committee decides on the recommendations, the finance ministry will issue a circular to make the new pay scale effective for the judicial service.

The new pay scale will take effect retroactively from July 1, 2026, and will be implemented gradually over four phases across the current and upcoming fiscal years.

Employees in Grades 10 to 20 will receive a 50 percent increase in their basic salaries in the first phase, effective from July 1. They will receive a further 25 percent increase from January 2027 and the remaining 25 percent from July 2027.

For officials in Grades 1 to 9, basic salaries will rise by 40 percent in the first phase, followed by another 30 percent increase from January 2027 and the final 30 percent from July 2027.

The fourth and final phase will begin on January 1, 2028, when the government will revise all other allowances for employees across the 20 grades.

Full implementation of the restructured salaries and allowances will add an estimated Tk 1,05,580 crore to the government's annual expenditure.

Currently, Bangladesh's public sector workforce includes 24 lakh civil and defence services employees and 9.25 lakh pensioners.

Under the revised structure, the minimum basic pay will rise from Tk 8,250 to Tk 20,000, while the maximum fixed basic salary will increase from Tk 78,000 to Tk 1,56,000.

Special grades remain in place for top officials: the cabinet secretary and principal secretary will draw a basic salary of Tk 1,72,000, while senior secretaries will receive Tk 1,64,000.

Dead-end jobs, meagre pay for makers of nation-builders

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professor emeritus at BRAC University, told The Daily Star.

Teachers and educationists said the issue extends beyond pay disparity, encompassing limited promotion opportunities, the absence of a clear career structure, and the relatively low status of primary teachers despite higher entry qualifications.

Shahinur Al Amin joined a primary school as an assistant teacher on January 14, 1999. More than 27 years later, he is still at the same post.

"For many professionals like us, having no promotion is deeply painful. But we must keep that bottled up and continue teaching," he said, adding that a defined career path could have given him two or three promotions.

Shahinur said supporting his wife, three children, and his mother in Dhaka costs around Tk 80,000 a month, forcing him to look for other sources of income.

"Many have their own businesses or tutor students. I am into music and perform at programmes. I sing on radio and television. This is how we have to manage our families."

With their various demands, the teachers took to the streets. In May 2025, assistant teachers staged work abstentions, demanding grade 11 upon entry, and higher-grade benefits after 10 and 16 years of service.

By November, the demand had moved to grade 10. Police used truncheons, sound grenades, and water cannons as teachers marched towards Shahbagh, leaving over 100 injured.

The movement was suspended after talks with the Finance Division but resumed later. The division said the pay proposal had been sent to the National Pay Commission.

Talking to this newspaper, Khayrun Nahar Lipi, general secretary of the Bangladesh Primary Teachers' Association and a leader of that movement, said the grade 10 demand was also about status and career prospects.

"It is not only a demand for higher pay; it is also about teachers' professional status, the importance of their responsibilities and a clear career structure."

Interim government's consultation committee on primary and non-formal education proposed abolishing the post of assistant teacher and recruiting new teachers under grade 12. They would be confirmed after two years and promoted to senior teachers in grade 11 after another two years. Headteachers would be placed in grade 10.

None of these has materialised.

Prof Manzoor, who led the consultation committee, said, "A rethinking of teachers' professional standard, preparation, incentives, status and performance assessment across goverment, and private institutions is urgently needed, rather than empty promises on Teachers' Day."

The teachers' demands also reflect how the position of primary teachers in the government pay structure has changed.

Primary-teacher salary records provided in the pay scale reviewed by The Daily Star place a trained assistant teacher in grade VIII in 1973, with a starting basic salary of Tk 220. Now they have inched closer to the bottom instead of climbing higher.

Prof Manzoor said Bangladeshi primary teachers get lower salaries compared to other South Asian countries.

Talking to this correspondent, Bobby Hajjaj, the state minister for primary and mass education, said grade 13 needed reconsideration as assistant teachers' qualifications and responsibilities have increased.

He said the ministry was considering grade 12 for the teachers. They will be promoted to 11th grade as senior teachers.

"But the administrative structure, the number of posts and financial implications would have to be examined first."

The ministry is also working on a career path based on qualifications, experience, training, and performance, Bobby said.

Metro under ground

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long queues of vehicles extending towards Badda.

He said construction work between Bashundhara and Notun Bazar, as well as towards Gulshan-2 and Banani, had made commuting difficult for everyone, especially students and office-goers.

"A journey that would normally take around 20 minutes now takes 40 minutes to an hour, particularly during office hours," Nuruzzaman said.

He said construction had been ongoing for about a year, while congestion had become particularly severe over the past six months.

Monowar Hossain, a CNG-run three-wheeler driver, said dug up roads had significantly reduced available space, while buses stopping in the middle of the road to pick up passengers further aggravated the situation.

Dhaka Mass Transit Company Limited (DMTCL) is implementing the MRT Line-1 project.

Sarwar Uddin Khan, project director of MRT Line-1, said utility relocation work was being carried out under several construction packages (CP). Work under CP-6, covering three stations from the airport, had been completed, while work under CP-5, covering one station, was ongoing.

The package covers areas including Nadda, Notun Bazar, Uttar Badda, Badda and Aftabnagar. Though the project authority had initially set a target to complete the work by March, 2027, the official indicated that some activities could continue until October or November next year.

He said the Notun Bazar package had faced delays following changes in contractors. The authority now plans to begin the work around January or February, with work on the Notun Bazar and airport sections expected to proceed simultaneously under different packages.

MRT Line-1, Bangladesh's first underground metro rail project inaugurated in February 2023, is expected to improve connectivity in the city by providing a high-capacity public transport system. It consists of two interconnected routes.

The 19.872km underground Airport Route with 12 stations will connect Hazrat Shahjalal International Airport with Kamalapur Railway Station. The 11.369km Purbachal Route with seven elevated and two underground stations will connect Notun Bazar with Purbachal.

On September 16, the Executive Committee of the National Economic Council (Ecnec) approved budget revisions to the MRT Line-1, as well as the 20km MRT Line-5 (Northern) projects, both financed by Japan. It also approved a new MRT Line-5 (Southern) project, which will be financed by the Asian Development Bank. The combined estimated cost of the projects is Tk 2.5 lakh crore

Star RU Correspondent

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8:00pm, looking for hall union General Secretary Ariful Islam. Several carried machetes, hockey sticks, pipes and bats.

They hid the weapons when Proctor Prof Mahbubur Rahman arrived, witnesses said. When the weapons were spotted later, the Samakal correspondent and Dwin Islam of Ajker Patrika moved in to record videos. The Samakal reporter was beaten with a stick, and an attempt was made to snatch Dwin's phone. The bdnews24.com correspondent was also assaulted.

The proctor took the journalists inside the hall and shut the entrance. As other reporters rushed to the site, Mridul and Zahidul were beaten, witnesses said. Zahidul suffered a head injury. Journalists who tried to protect their colleagues were threatened.

Witnesses named RU Chhatra Dal vice-presidents Ahsan Habib and Shariful Islam, Joint General Secretary Hasibul Islam and Assistant Office Secretary Shahriar Alam among at least 10 leaders and activists involved.

RU Chhatra Dal President Sultan Ahmed Rahi said he had informed the central leadership. "Action will be taken against them quickly," he said.

Chhatra Dal's central General Secretary Nasir Uddin Nasir said, "I have just learnt about the incident. I am trying to get the details. We will take action against those responsible."

The proctor said the university authorities had failed to bring the situation under control.

RU Pro-VC Prof Abdul Alim said the authorities were looking into the incident. "We will not tolerate any criminal activities on campus. Those involved will be brought under the law," he said.

The National Citizen Party condemned the attack and demanded the arrest and punishment of those responsible. In a statement, it called for measures to ensure the safety of students and journalists and protect freedom of expression.

The incident followed a Facebook dispute between Ahsan Habib and Rakibul Islam, assistant cultural secretary of Rajshahi University Central Students' Union (Rucsu), over a post about Rucsu General Secretary Salahuddin Ammar.

Habib alleged that Rakibul used abusive language about his mother and sister in a comment. Rakibul claimed Habib threatened to assault him. Both posted their accounts on social media.

On Saturday, Rakibul stayed in front of the hall from 10:00am to 5:00pm. Habib later arrived with several Chhatra Dal leaders and activists, some carrying bats, and announced they would stay until 10:00pm.

Ariful later accused Chhatra Dal members in a Facebook post of carrying locally made weapons and engaging in violence on campus. Witnesses alleged the group returned to the hall last night with weapons before attacking the journalists.