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

An alarming misuse of authority

A state minister's armed anti-drug operation raises serious questions

The sight of a state minister carrying a firearm while leading an anti-drug operation in his constituency raises serious questions about the rule of law in the country and the government's commitment to upholding it. On Saturday, State Minister for Liberation War Affairs Ishraque Hossain was seen in video clips posted on his Facebook page chasing people near Gandaria railway station in Dhaka, accompanied by armed bodyguards. The video clips, which have drawn widespread criticism, also show a bodyguard kicking a man. While the state minister says he acted after repeated complaints about drug trading in the area and alleged police inaction, this cannot justify a government representative taking the law into his own hands.

Ishraque claims that he repeatedly raised the issue with police but received no effective response. However, the OC of Gandaria Police Station has disputed the claim of inaction, saying a 300-member police team, along with other specialised units, conducted an operation in the area on October 11. While an impartial inquiry into the police response against the drug trade is necessary, it does not excuse the state minister's conduct.

Under Article 25 of the Firearms Licence, Renewal and Use Policy, 2025, a licensed firearm may be carried or used for self-defence but must not be displayed in a manner that causes fear or annoyance. A firearm licence is intended for personal protection, not for apprehending or punishing suspected offenders. The state minister's claim that he legally acquired the firearm does not mean he was permitted to carry and display it during the operation. The authorities must investigate the circumstances and take appropriate action in this regard.

We urge the government to investigate the incident impartially, including the display of firearms and the alleged mistreatment of detainees. It must also find out whether the police responded appropriately to residents' complaints and ensure that suspected drug dealers are dealt with through lawful measures.

More importantly, what message does such conduct send to the public? If a state minister feels compelled to lead an armed operation because the police cannot be relied upon, should citizens conclude that the police and the Department of Narcotics Control are incapable of doing their jobs? The government and its ministers should direct anti-drug efforts, while the police are responsible for carrying out operations. If a state minister has to personally lead an armed raid, what role are the police expected to play? Ishraque's actions also send the wrong message to the government and the ruling party about how public authority should be exercised. If elected representatives can personally pursue and detain suspected offenders, what prevents others from following their example? The government must not allow the fight against crime to become a justification for intimidation or arbitrary action.

We urge the government to investigate the incident impartially, including the display of firearms and the alleged mistreatment of detainees. It must also find out whether the police responded appropriately to residents' complaints and ensure that suspected drug dealers are dealt with through lawful measures. Police and narcotics control authorities must also demonstrate their ability to tackle illegal drug trade effectively. And if the government expects citizens to respect the law, its representatives must set an example and address institutional failures through proper oversight and accountability.

Yet another preventable tragedy

Fire at Cox's Bazar resort demand accountability

There is perhaps nothing more outrageous than entirely preventable deaths. Every year, Bangladesh sees thousands of deaths that could be avoided if only we had safer roads, better building codes, and proper enforcement of regulations. Unfortunately, that is not our reality. The latest incident occurred on Saturday when at least 10 people were killed in a resort fire in Cox's Bazar.

The resort, named Tuptup Resto & Resort, is located near Patuartek beach along the marine drive in Ukhiya. The fire broke out around 7:00am, but the fire service could not bring the blaze under control until 11:00am. By then, the blaze had claimed the lives of 10 tourists, six of whom were members of the same family. The three-storey resort, which was made of wood, was completely reduced to charcoal, and the deceased were burnt beyond recognition. Police have filed a case over the incident, accusing the resort owner, manager, and 21 others. While the manager has been detained already, the whereabouts of the owner remain unknown.

According to reports, the resort was declared "risky" during an inspection in June that found the establishment lacking in safety measures. Even if the owner had been warned about non-compliance during the inspection, it does not absolve the authorities of responsibility. Why was the resort not shut down immediately, with visitors warned of the potential risks? And even when the resort was allowed to operate, were there any follow-up visits to ensure compliance after the earlier inspection? These questions are particularly important to address in a climate where hundreds of hotels and resorts are sprouting up along our coast, with many having zero regard for safety protocols, the surrounding environment, or the locals.

The government, therefore, must not only investigate this particular resort's failure to meet safety requirements, but also look into the regulatory lapses that allowed it to operate despite the known risks. The relevant authorities must ensure that permits are issued only after proper safety checks, followed by regular inspections and strict enforcement. It's high time the government curbed the use of political patronage to shield businesses from accountability. Moreover, just arresting a few individuals and announcing compensation for the victims' families cannot be the extent of the authorities' response. After all, without accountability and preventive action, another tragedy is only a matter of time.

We can't end child marriage without closing legal loopholes

MIND THE GAP



Barrister Noshin Nawal is a columnist for The Daily Star. She can be reached at nawalnoshin1@gmail.com.

NOSHIN NAWAL

Nearly a decade after the Child Marriage Restraint Act, 2017 was enacted, its contradictions expose a deeper failure: the state punishes child marriage without guaranteeing children protection, justice or a way out. A girl can be married illegally in Bangladesh yet remain legally married. The people responsible may face punishment, but the marriage itself can survive. She may be recognised as a victim of child marriage without being given an effective legal route to leave it. This is not merely a loophole but a fundamental contradiction in how the country understands and protects children's rights.

A newly published Unicef-UNFPA review of the Child Marriage Restraint Act, also examined in a recent report by *The Daily Star*, exposes the troubling distance between legislative intention and lived reality. Almost a decade after the law's enactment, the country continues to maintain a legal framework that condemns child marriage while leaving significant avenues for its continuation. The consequences are measurable: according to the 2025 Multiple Indicator Cluster Survey, 47.2 percent of women aged 20-24 were married before turning 18, compared with 51.4 percent in 2019. Although this represents progress, nearly one in two young women still entered marriage as children (The Child Act, 2013 defines any person up to the age of 18 as a child). Bangladesh consequently retains the highest prevalence of child marriage in South Asia.

The problem is not simply that the law is inadequately enforced. It is that the law itself does not consistently deliver the protection it promises. Consider Section 19, perhaps its most contentious provision. It permits marriages involving minors under special circumstances, subject to judicial approval and prescribed safeguards. Ostensibly intended as an exception, it introduces ambiguity into a prohibition that ought to be unequivocal. Where poverty, social stigma, sexual violence and family pressure influence decisions about marriage, how meaningful can a child's consent be? And whose interests are ultimately served when marriage is presented as the solution to circumstances that should instead trigger protection? Unicef and UNFPA recommend removing this exception entirely. The argument is compelling: a child's vulnerability should strengthen the state's protective obligations, not provide grounds for relaxing them.

Equally troubling is the 2017 law's failure to make child marriages automatically void or expressly voidable at the child's request. The overlapping statutory and religious personal laws in the country create a situation in which a marriage may attract criminal penalties while retaining legal recognition. The review proposes allowing those married as children to seek annulment until the age of 22, alongside compensation and safeguards for children born within such marriages.

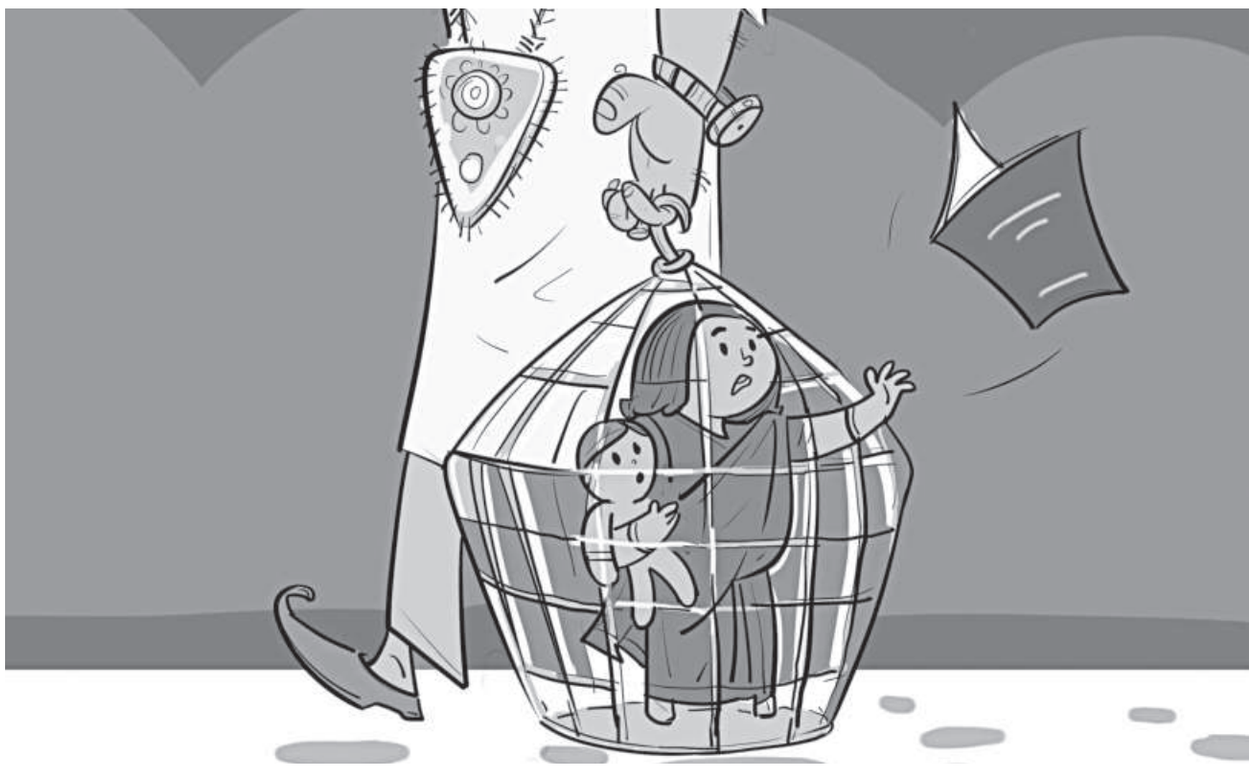
Moreover, annulment must be accompanied by accessible legal aid, safe accommodation and financial support. Otherwise, the right to leave may exist on paper while remaining practically inaccessible to a girl dependent on the very household she seeks to escape. Other contradictions reveal how insufficiently the legislation distinguishes protection from punishment. Section 7(2) permits penalties against minors themselves, while the statutory minimum marriage ages remain unequal: 18 for females and 21 for males. A protective law should not treat the child as an offender. Nor should it preserve gender distinctions that sit uneasily with the broader principle of equality before the law.

However, reforming these provisions alone will not address the social conditions that make early marriage appear inevitable. Child marriage and educational exclusion reinforce one another. Girls leave school because they marry, but they may also marry because remaining in school has become financially, geographically or socially untenable. Unicef's latest education indicators show that 33.9 percent of upper-secondary-school-age children are out of school, while the upper-secondary completion rate stands at just 43.9 percent. These figures concern all children, but the implications for girls facing marriage pressure are particularly serious.

The human cost is visible in the October 11, 2026 report on girls' education published by *The Daily Star*. It recounts the experience of Sumi Rani, married at 14 after schooling became increasingly difficult to sustain amid considerable travel and educational expenses. Her experience raises an uncomfortable question: what does the legal minimum marriage age accomplish when a family cannot afford to keep its daughter in school? The answer cannot be legislation alone. Secondary school retention must become a central pillar of child marriage prevention, supported by targeted stipends, safe transport, effective re-enrolment pathways, and financial assistance for vulnerable households.

The urgency is reinforced by reproductive health indicators. The Unicef-UNFPA review records an increase in adolescent births from 83 to 92 per 1,000 girls aged 15-19 between 2019 and 2025. Early marriage, therefore, has consequences for bodily autonomy, maternal health and intergenerational poverty. Recent incidents also demonstrate why prevention cannot depend exclusively on reactive enforcement. In September 2026, authorities intervened in the attempted marriage of an 11-year-old schoolgirl in Keraniganj, sentencing several adults involved. The intervention was necessary, but it illustrates a larger challenge: protecting children before arrangements reach the point of a wedding ceremony. Importantly, Bangladesh has not lacked reform discussions. In April 2025, the interim government's Women's Affairs Reform Commission proposed wide-ranging changes, including a uniform family code to address discrimination across marriage, divorce and other family matters. Such proposals speak directly to the legal fragmentation identified in the Unicef-UNFPA review. Subsequently, an October 2025 inter-ministerial dialogue supported by UNFPA identified reform of the Child Marriage Restraint Act, 2017, digitised marriage registration, improved school retention, and stronger local accountability as priorities.

These initiatives demonstrated institutional recognition of the problem. What remains insufficiently established is whether that recognition has translated into binding legislative change, funded protection services, and measurable accountability. Bangladesh is also bound by international commitments, including the Convention on the Rights of the Child and the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women. Sustainable Development Goal 5.3 calls for elimination of child marriage by 2030.



FILE ILLUSTRATION: **BIPLOB CHAKROBORTY**

These commitments cannot be satisfied by criminal prohibitions that leave children without effective remedies.

Hence, a credible reform agenda must operate on three fronts: eliminate statutory exceptions and contradictions; guarantee survivor-centred legal, financial and social protection; and make keeping girls in secondary education an enforceable policy priority rather than an aspirational objective. This requires clear ministerial responsibility, functioning local prevention mechanisms, transparent implementation data, and dedicated public financing.

Ultimately, the measure of a child marriage law is not how many marriages it criminalises, but how many children it enables to remain safe, educated and free to determine their futures. Bangladesh does not need another declaration that child marriage is unacceptable—its laws already say so. What it needs is a legal system that stops making exceptions to that principle, and a state willing to make freedom from child marriage a practical reality.

Our economic recovery must ease the burden of survival



Farah Kabir is country director at ActionAid Bangladesh.

FARAH KABIR

Bangladesh's economic crisis is not only about poverty. It is also about the growing fragility of households and an economy that increasingly depends on people exhausting themselves to survive. At the recent launch of the Power and Participation Research Centre (PPRC) book *The Real State of Bangladesh's Economy: The Return of Poverty and the Dynamics of Resilience*, panellists expressed concern centred on the risk of more people falling into poverty and the vulnerability of those just above the poverty line. The World Bank's October 2026 assessment estimates that around 21 lakh more people fell into poverty in FY2025-26. Economic insecurity is spreading beyond the poorest households to those once considered relatively stable.

A household may be above the poverty line on paper and still struggle to afford food, safe water, electricity, transport, and healthcare. One illness, lost job or price increase can unravel its finances. Poverty is not simply a fixed category; for millions, it is the constant risk of falling backwards. This is where a feminist reading of the economy becomes essential.

One word used during the discussion captured the everyday burden of survival: "hoirani". Difficult to translate precisely, it conveys the harassment, hassle, and relentless weariness of navigating daily life: finding affordable food, managing shortages, negotiating inadequate services, and making insufficient money last. This is more than inconvenience. It is the cumulative cost of an economy that makes survival exhausting.

Women often carry a disproportionate share of this burden. When budgets contract, they stretch meals, absorb additional care work, and postpone their own needs. Bangladesh's unpaid household production account estimated that unpaid domestic and care work contributed Tk 6.7 lakh crore in 2021, almost one-fifth of GDP. Women performed 85 percent of it.

We celebrate resilience, but at what cost? When survival means working longer, eating less, borrowing more, delaying treatment, and providing ever more unpaid care, resilience becomes self-exploitation. Healthcare costs deepen this precarity. As the discussion highlighted, many families have a member living with chronic illness, bringing recurring expenses. These costs can consume money needed for food, education, and other essentials. Illness can become an economic crisis for an entire household.

Climate change compounds the pressure. Extreme heat threatens health and reduces working hours and earnings, particularly for people in informal employment. Water stress adds costs and labour as households struggle to secure enough safe water. Women frequently absorb this extra work alongside caring for family members. Climate vulnerability is therefore also an economic and care crisis.

According to the Labour Force Survey 2022, 84.9 percent of employed people worked in the informal sector, with the share rising to 96.6 percent among employed women. These workers sustain agriculture, transport, domestic services, and local markets, often without secure earnings, paid leave, or adequate social protection. For a street vendor, agricultural labourers or domestic worker, a day without work means a day without income. Food, rent, water, and medical bills, however, do not wait.

The ready-made garment sector presents a related challenge. Women have helped build Bangladesh's export economy, yet low wages, unequal care responsibilities and limited progression into higher-value work constrain their security. As automation and artificial intelligence reshape production, women must be equipped to lead technological change, not simply bear the costs of displacement. We must change how the economy distributes income, resources, risks, and power.

First, establish living wages which reflect the actual cost of living. This means fair wages for garment workers and a credible framework for reasonable daily wages for informal workers, backed by stronger labour protections and social security. Employment should offer a route out of insecurity, not merely a means of enduring it.

Second, treat care as public infrastructure. Affordable childcare, accessible healthcare, safe water, sanitation, and public transport reduce the burden on households. Stronger public health services and social protection must prevent illness and climate shocks from pushing families, including informal workers, into poverty.

Third, expand women's control over economic resources. Enforce property and inheritance rights, improve access to land and productive assets, and provide affordable capital for women-led enterprises and cooperatives. Public investment and gender-equitable financing should widen access to productive opportunities, rather than concentrate them among the already wealthy and well-connected.

Finally, reform the institutions that govern access to finance, markets, and decent work. Transparent banking, accountable regulation, representative worker organisations, and women's meaningful participation in economic decisions are not optional additions to growth. They are conditions for a fairer, more productive economy.

A country cannot build prosperity on the exhaustion of its people. The real measure of recovery is whether people can live with dignity without having to self-exploit. Transform the economy through systemic change, not patchwork fixes.

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/