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

Keep politics out of hospital expansion

New hospital beds should go where patients are

Bangladesh needs more hospital beds. On that, at least, there is no dispute. Public hospitals across the country routinely admit two, three, or even four patients for every bed they have, and the overflow spills onto floors and into corridors. A government that sets out to add capacity deserves credit for recognising the problem. The question raised in a report by this daily is not whether the BNP government should be expanding hospitals, but how it is choosing which ones.

The numbers are uncomfortable. Of the 2,879 beds added to public hospitals since the government took office in February, about 93 percent went to facilities in districts or constituencies linked to ministers and state ministers, including the prime minister. Just 191 were approved elsewhere. In addition, two new government medical colleges have been sanctioned: one in the home district of the president, who was the local government minister when the decision was made, and the other in that of the health minister.

Some of these decisions can be defended on their merit. The medical college hospital in Bogura, the prime minister's home district, was treating more than three patients for every bed before it was expanded from 1,200 to 1,800 beds. Rajshahi, which received a more modest increase, was similarly stretched. The health minister argues that remote areas such as Rangamati have long been neglected and must be brought into the mainstream—a fair point in a country whose healthcare is heavily concentrated in Dhaka. Ministers, moreover, come from many parts of the country; some overlap between their seats and genuine need is to be expected.

The health minister said the overlooked hospitals are under consideration and asked critics to wait a year. That may prove true. The government has also announced a plan to expand every upazila health complex to 151 beds in phases, which, if delivered, would spread capacity more evenly than anything seen so far. But beds are the easiest part of a hospital

But the pattern cannot be explained by need alone. Mymensingh Medical College Hospital recorded the highest bed occupancy rate of any medical college hospital in 2024, at 329 percent, and treated about 2.5 times as many inpatients as Bogura. It has not had a bed added since 2013. Hospitals in Khulna, Sylhet, Cumilla, Rangpur and Barishal, all running far above capacity, were passed over, while Mugda Medical College Hospital in Dhaka and Dinajpur—with occupancy rates of 157-169 percent — doubled to 1,000 beds each.

The health minister said the overlooked hospitals are under consideration and asked critics to wait a year. That may prove true. The government has also announced a plan to expand every upazila health complex to 151 beds in phases, which, if delivered, would spread capacity more evenly than anything seen so far. But beds are the easiest part of a hospital; doctors, nurses, equipment, and running budgets are not. The health ministry should strictly use the criteria for expansion—occupancy, inpatient volumes, catchment populations, distance to the nearest tertiary facility, etc—and rank hospitals against them. The Directorate General of Health Services already collects much of the necessary data in its annual health bulletin.

Bangladesh has a long habit of patronage politics. Any administration that claims to break with it must show how it spends public money. Hospital beds are a test.

Let's sustain the spirit of interfaith harmony

Peaceful Durga Puja celebration comes with a positive message

As the sound of the dhak faded with Durga's Bisharjan, marking the end of the six-day puja festival, a common feeling resonated across the country. The essence of the slogan, "Dhormo jar jar, utshob shobar" ("Religion belongs to individuals; festivals belong to everyone") was felt more widely than usual. A sense of security and communal harmony prevailed, which has been absent during puja seasons in recent years. We must thank the government for ensuring and enabling such an atmosphere during one of the most important festivities of the Hindu community.

Prime Minister Tarique Rahman's visits to puja mandaps in Dhaka as well as several other districts demonstrated his personal commitment to ensuring that no untoward incident marred the joyous occasion. His speech, too, reflected his resolve, "Religion may be different; I may follow one religion and you another. But the state belongs to all." That is the message of the Sharbajanin Durga Utshob, in which people from all communities joined this year, enjoying the five-day public holiday, including the weekend. Besides, the increase in government grants for mandaps from Tk 4 crore to Tk 5 crore also sent a positive message. Across the country, 33,851 mandaps were established for the puja.

It was the unprecedented security measures taken well ahead of the festival that contributed the most to the sense of safety. Thousands of members of security forces, including the Border Guard Bangladesh, Bangladesh Coast Guard and Special Response Battalion, were deployed at temples and mandaps around the country, while in the capital, the Dhaka Metropolitan Police assigned 2,072 additional police personnel to guard the festive venues.

That is not to say that there were no pre-puja incidents. Bangladesh Puja Udjapan Parishad reported 34 incidents of idol vandalism, attacks on temples and related clashes ahead of the festival. However, police said their field-level verification found no evidence that the incidents were deliberately orchestrated to undermine communal harmony or disrupt the festival.

Of course, ensuring the safety of minority communities and protecting their rights to practise their faith freely should be a year-round task. Bangladesh will be truly all-inclusive and communal harmony will prevail only when our government and the law enforcement agencies ensure, without exception, that all communities, irrespective of their religion, ethnicity or class, can live and practise their faiths here without facing intimidation and discrimination.

New info commission faces a bigger task than clearing complaints

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After more than two years of uncertainty, Bangladesh finally has a new Information Commission. We congratulate the newly appointed chief information commissioner—the country's first woman to hold the post—and the two other commissioners, and wish them success. Their appointment brings relief to citizens and civil society organisations that have persistently called for the restoration of this vital institution.

For about two years, they have highlighted the consequences of leaving the commission without commissioners. Conscious citizens, while continuing to exercise their rights under the Right to Information (RTI) Act, 2009, lacked an effective avenue for redress when public authorities refused to provide information. With commissioners now in place, the institution can resume hearing complaints and appeals and take action within its statutory mandate. The greater challenge, however, lies elsewhere.

The commissioners' responsibility is not only to dispose of complaints but also to help replace the country's entrenched administrative culture of secrecy with one of transparency and accountability. The RTI Act's fundamental objective—empowering citizens to understand how public authorities function, scrutinise their activities, and hold them accountable—remains far from being achieved. Bureaucratic resistance, inadequate public awareness, and weak institutional capacity have contributed to this failure. Above all, successive governments have lacked a sustained commitment to openness, while successive Information Commissions have failed to use their statutory powers effectively to challenge official secrecy.

The new commission, therefore, must be more than a forum for settling individual disputes. When information is refused, it should carefully examine the reasons, determine whether the refusal was lawful, and ensure that appropriate remedies or penalties are applied where warranted. Securing eventual disclosure alone may leave the underlying violation or the broader culture of secrecy unaddressed.

The RTI Act provides for penalties for specified violations, including unjustified refusal to provide information and deliberate obstruction. Yet previous commissions appeared reluctant to exercise these powers decisively, risking the impression that non-compliance carries little consequence. The new commissioners should enforce the law firmly, fairly, and consistently, paying particular attention to repeated or deliberate violations. A few well-reasoned decisions imposing warranted sanctions could do more to change official behaviour than numerous awareness seminars.

That said, some information may legitimately be withheld under the law. But exemptions from disclosure for reasons set out in the law are exceptions to the principle of openness, not excuses to be used as convenient. A public authority invoking an exemption must identify the relevant legal provision and explain precisely why it applies. Merely citing the act should not suffice. The commission must independently scrutinise such explanations, especially when public expenditure, essential services, or government decisions are involved. Where only part of a document is exempt from disclosure, it should consider whether the remainder can be released.



VISUAL: **ALIZA RAHMAN**

As discussed in an earlier article, Sri Lanka's RTI Commission and courts, in a case concerning former President Gotabaya Rajapaksa's departure during a political crisis, distinguished sensitive security information from details of public expenditure. While protecting information legitimately exempt from disclosure, they upheld the right to access non-exempt information. The lesson is clear: claims of secrecy must withstand rigorous legal scrutiny.

As a statutory adjudicatory body, the Information Commission should issue reasoned decisions that identify the issues, consider both parties' arguments, apply the relevant legal provisions, and explain its conclusions. Brief directions may settle individual disputes but do little to establish consistent interpretations of the law. Publishing significant decisions in an accessible, searchable format would also guide officials and applicants, promote consistency, and gradually build a valuable body of RTI jurisprudence. Attention must also be given to establishing an effective follow-up and monitoring mechanism, including accountability measures to ensure that concerned designated officers implement decisions in a timely manner.

We have previously documented how ordinary citizens have sought information about schools, hospitals, social protection, land, public works, local public resources, etc. In northern Bangladesh, applicants have questioned the disposal of government trees, investigated abandoned projects, and demanded better services. Some have faced intimidation from officials unwilling to accept their right to ask questions. The commission should respond promptly to such allegations of unlawful refusal, harassment or retaliation, taking appropriate action within its powers. Women, rural residents, and disadvantaged applicants deserve particular attention.

The backlog of cases accumulated during the prolonged absence of commissioners also demands a published, time-bound plan for disposing of pending cases. The RTI regime's success cannot be measured solely by the number of applications received or complaints resolved, however. Public authorities must also proactively disclose important information, including their functions, decisions, budgets, expenditure and services, as required by the law.

It bears repeating how vital it is that the commission monitors compliance, publishes its findings, promotes sound record management, and ensures that information officers receive adequate training. It could also publish comparative assessments of public authorities' disclosure performance using transparent criteria. Such measures would help make openness a routine administrative practice rather than an exception secured through complaints.

The commission must also practise the transparency it demands by regularly publishing its decisions, penalties, compliance rates, and case statistics. It should also consult journalists, civil society organisations, and grassroots RTI users. Above all, it must act independently of political and bureaucratic pressure. The government, for its part, must provide adequate resources while respecting that independence.

In the final analysis, the commissioners inherit not simply a backlog of cases needing adjudication but also an unfinished democratic mission. Their success in the long term will be measured by whether public officials become more willing to disclose information and citizens more confident in demanding it. They take office amid high expectations, shaped by both the commission's prolonged inactivity and the changed political environment post-uprising. We hope they will rise to the challenge and ensure that citizens' right to know is not merely a promise enshrined in law but a reality in everyday life.

Gender-responsive budgets need women decision-makers



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■ **RIZWANA TABASSUM**

When a government prepares its budget, the discussion often centers on revenue, expenditure, aid, deficits, and development priorities. But behind these numbers are real lives. Decisions to fund a hospital, build a school, expand a social protection initiative, or improve public transport can affect women and men in different ways. We often ask whether enough public money goes to women's needs. But there is another question worth asking: who gets to make those decisions? We must also consider whether women have a meaningful voice in the institutions that raise, allocate, spend, and analyse public money.

Bangladesh's FY2026-27 budget brings this question into sharper focus, as the gender-relevant budget reached Tk 3,26,059.8 crore, equivalent to 34.8 percent of the national budget. However, the allocation for the Ministry of Women and Children Affairs has fallen to Tk 5,196 crore from Tk 5,371 crore in the previous year's revised budget, while recent analysis has raised concerns about implementation, outcome measurement, and accountability. These figures prompt the question of how we can ensure that public spending advances gender equality and who has the authority to make those decisions.

A recently published book, Women in Public Finance: Stories of Gender in Budgeting, edited by Maja Bosnić and Manal Fouad, brings this question into focus. Through the experiences of women working in public finance across different countries, the book highlights the challenges and opportunities facing women in a field traditionally dominated by technical discourse and male leadership. It reminds us that public finance is not gender-neutral simply because its language is technical.

Bangladesh has made notable progress in women's education, economic participation, and political representation. It has also developed experience in gender-responsive budgeting, seeking to align public expenditure with gender equality and women's empowerment. These efforts are important, but they raise a further question: while governments increasingly consider women in their budgets, are enough women involved in shaping the decisions behind those budgets?

In my more than 20 years of experience in finance, governance, audit, treasury management, and public sector reform, I have seen an increasing number of women joining accounting, auditing, economics, and financial management, bringing talent, expertise, and fresh perspectives to the field. But while women are well represented at entry and mid-career levels, they are still underrepresented in senior leadership positions where strategic decisions are made.

The Public Expenditure and Financial Accountability (PEFA) Gender Responsive Public Financial Management Framework, launched in 2020, offers a useful way to examine this relationship. Its nine indicators assess how gender considerations are incorporated across the budget cycle, including policy analysis, public investment, expenditure tracking, service delivery evaluation, and legislative scrutiny. The framework makes clear that gender responsiveness is not simply about identifying allocations for women; it is also about examining how public financial management systems operate and what results they achieve. For Bangladesh, the next step should be to connect gender-related budget allocations more systematically with implementation, measurable outcomes, and accountability. Governments need reliable information on who benefits from public spending, whether services are accessible and effective, and where gaps remain.

Women's participation can strengthen this process. Women working in finance ministries, budget divisions, audit institutions, public enterprises, and reform programmes can contribute their professional expertise and perspectives to policy design and oversight. Decisions about taxation, public investment, social protection, healthcare, education, and infrastructure can have different consequences for different groups, and these differences deserve careful analysis.

This calls for practical institutional changes. Women should have fair access to senior technical and leadership positions in public finance, supported by transparent promotion processes, mentoring, and opportunities to lead major reforms. Budget institutions should make greater use of sex-disaggregated performance data and independent evaluations to assess who benefits from public expenditure. Audit findings and legislative scrutiny should also examine whether public programmes achieve their intended results for women and men.

Equally important is the need to recognise women as decision-makers, not merely as beneficiaries of public policy. Their participation should extend throughout the public financial management cycle, including decisions about revenue, spending priorities, implementation, and accountability. This requires more than appointing women to committees; it requires giving them the authority, information, and institutional support needed to influence decisions.

The argument is not that women automatically make better financial decisions than men. Good public finance depends on professional competence, sound evidence, integrity, and effective institutions. But institutions make better-informed decisions when they draw on a wider range of experiences and perspectives. Excluding capable professionals from leadership narrows the pool of talent available to solve complex public problems.

Bangladesh has demonstrated its ability to pursue ambitious reforms in public financial management and women's empowerment. The opportunity now is to bring these agendas closer together: to strengthen not only the gender responsiveness of public budgets but also women's participation in the institutions that formulate, implement, and scrutinise them.

Ultimately, a budget is more than a financial document. It reflects public priorities, distributes opportunities, and determines how citizens experience the state. Ensuring that women have a meaningful voice in these decisions is not simply a matter of representation. It is part of building more responsive, transparent and accountable public institutions.

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