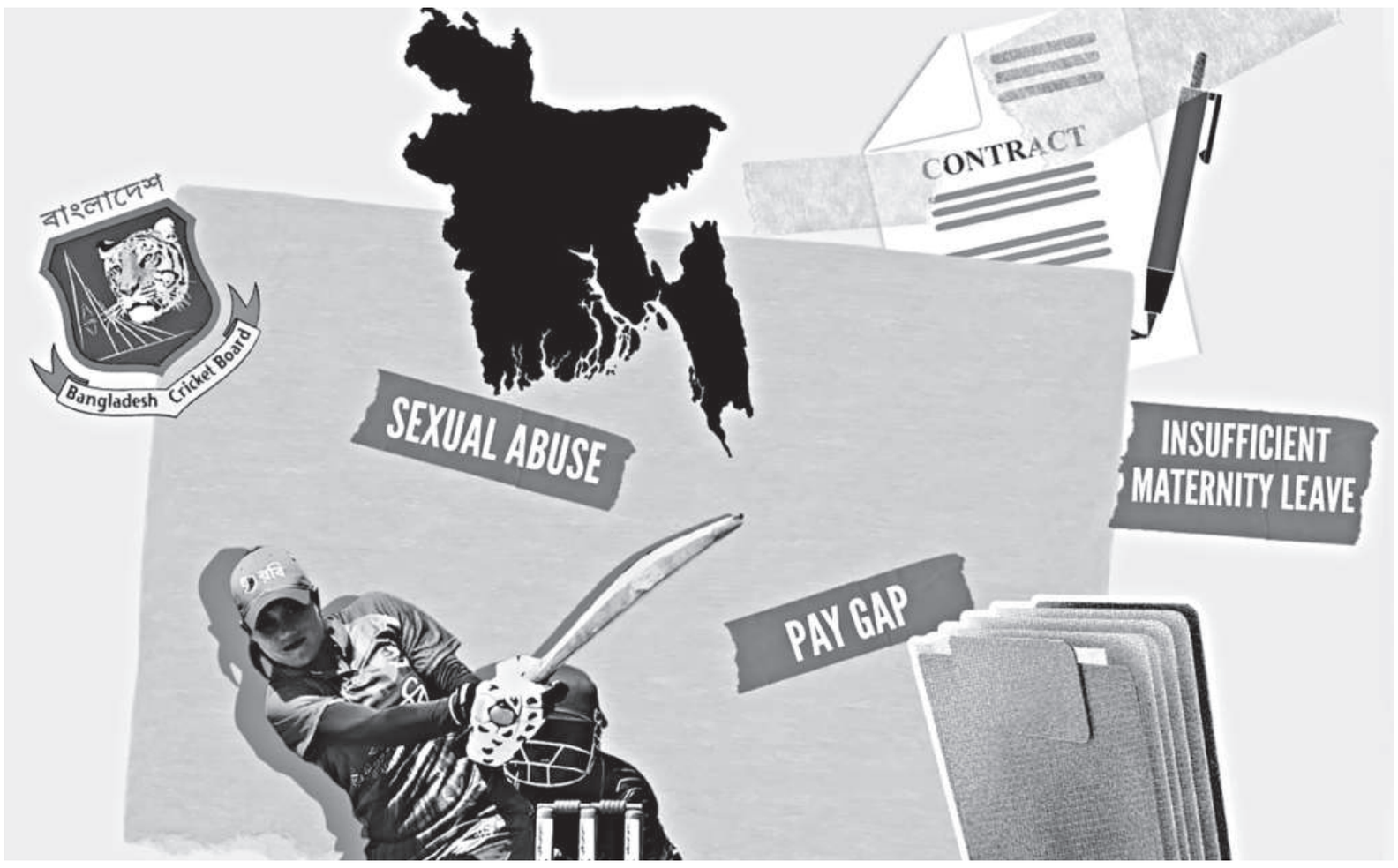
Women cricketers deserve equal rights, not discretionary favours



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■ AZRA HUMAYRA



VISUAL: **ALIZA RAHMAN**

Women's cricket is treated as an afterthought time and time again. Women's domestic match fees have doubled, yet the Tk 40,000 offered for longer-format matches remains far below the Tk 1.5 lakh paid to men for four-day fixtures. This makes cricket a lucrative sport for the male cricketers and an entirely different proposition for women, who are expected to show the same level of dedication as men and overcome additional societal barriers, yet receive only a fraction of the financial support needed to sustain their careers.

Former pacer Suraiya Azmin emailed the Bangladesh Cricket Board (BCB) on May 9 requesting paid maternity leave and received no response. She gave birth in August and found herself dropped from the national contract list, with her leave request and unpaid wages unsettled. She received zero support from BCB and lost her livelihood in the process of giving birth.

Sanjida Islam Moyna, who played in 70 international one-day and T-20 matches and continued in domestic cricket after her marriage but stepped away after giving birth in 2025. She said that cricket officials and selectors assume married players and mothers will not last and see no point in investing in them.

The point is that those assumptions are never applied to anyone other than women. A male cricketer can become a father and return to training, but no such guarantee is afforded to women. The system does not need to explicitly bar mothers from playing cricket. It simply makes it so difficult for expecting and new mothers to continue their careers that they are eventually forced to leave, allowing their departure to be portrayed as a "personal choice".

Some players delay marriage to prolong their careers; others hide that they are married because they know the price of the tag. Former Bangladesh player and current Qatar women's team head coach Fatema Tuz Jahara points to the money. A national contract often supports a whole family, so a female player has to "think ten times" when it comes to pregnancy. Women are asked to choose between family and sports when men do not have to make that choice.

A different approach is possible. Australia and New Zealand provide paid maternity leave for paid contracted players. Pakistan introduced a Parental Support Policy in 2021. A year later, Bismah Maroof captained the Pakistan team at the 2022 ICC Cricket World Cup six months after giving birth.

The ICC's new Return to Play Post-Pregnancy Guidelines are a welcome development, offering guidance on recovery, training and practical support, but they stop short of guaranteeing paid maternity leave or protecting players' salaries. The guidelines are futile if the member boards do not implement them. The BCB said that it will follow the ICC guidelines. Yet its women's wing chairperson, Rafiqul Islam Babu, admitted he did not know why no guideline existed already, and CEO Nizam Uddin Chowdhury describes matters being addressed "case-by-case".

This is a recurring theme in women's cricket, as maternity is not the only place where BCB turns a blind eye. This cannot be called an oversight because the system is working the way it is designed. On November 1, online news portal The Whistle published an 11-month investigation about the alleged sexual harassment by coaches and selectors. At every level, aspiring female cricketers depend on coaches and selectors for career advancement, creating a clear imbalance of power. The story unravels the system that perpetuates sexual harassment from district to national level.

National contracts last for one year, and their renewal depends on selectors' assessments. Only 17 women currently hold such contracts. Former captain Jahanara Alam claims to have experienced the consequences of this discretionary power, which can also leave new mothers vulnerable to being dropped from the squad. She alleged that Manjurul Islam Manju, former selector and manager of the national women's team, proposed a sexual relationship during the 2022 World Cup. Manju denies the claim, but a committee appointed by the BCB found preliminary evidence supporting two of her four allegations. Jahanara remained silent for years because the player feared losing her contract.

The committee also found that BCB had no framework to prevent sexual harassment, despite the 2009 High Court directive. The BCB could have used Jahanara's case as an opportunity to investigate wider allegations of sexual harassment in women's cricket, but there is little publicly available evidence that it did so. Action under the law was recommended, but Manjurul was only banned by the BCB. Ironically, he occupied no post at BCB at that time.

A harassment policy appeared on the BCB website on October 12, only after The Whistle began asking questions. Nizam Uddin Chowdhury told The Whistle it was approved in July and is an "internal policy". The 10 contracted players The Whistle contacted had never heard of it, and no complaints committee has been named. The chairperson of the women's wing also reportedly did not know such committees exist.

Herein lies the predicament because the problem cannot be found unless the victims speak up. When a coach allegedly groped a young female cricketer at 18, she left the field. Such departures, like that of athlete mothers, appear in no statistics. For this piece, I tried to find figures on how many players leave after marriage or after giving birth but could not find any data from the BCB. During the Covid lockdown, BCB director Ahmed Sajjadul Alam Bobby said female cricketers usually leave the game after marriage. Being aware of the problem yet failing to take any measures to address it is itself a deliberate choice.

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The consequences of this neglect are evident on the field. The Women's Bangladesh Premier League (WBPL) remains an unfulfilled promise. According to former captain Rumana Ahmed, the number of matches declined under Nazmul Abedeen Fahim's tenure. In 2025, the Bangladesh Cricket League (BCL) ended after just two of its three scheduled matches, depriving players of valuable playing and earning opportunities. Worse, ahead of the 2025 World Cup in India, the national women's team had to practise against the boys' under-15 team because the BCB failed to arrange an international series, leaving them without adequate match preparation. Neglect follows in other places too; in 2025, the Cricketers' Welfare Association of Bangladesh (CWAB) held pre-election meetings without a single woman present. There is no woman on the BCB's newly elected board, and selector Salma Khatun is the only woman in a key national position, reports The Whistle. It shows the sheer lack of importance given to the female cricketers.

If the BCB is conscientious about its female cricketers, it must understand that without a safety net, women are likely to feel disquieted about returning to the field. It must form an independent complaints committee consisting of women and outside members. It should publish a written policy with paid maternity leave and protected contracts, medical assessments before return, and transparent rules for selection and renewal, so marriage, pregnancy, or refusing a coach's advances never become unofficial reasons to drop anyone.

The instances make it clear that the neglect is staunchly structural because these issues persist from maternity leave, contract security, and sexual harassment cases to match fees, domestic tournaments, and representation in decision-making. Without a written policy, financial security and genuine investment in women's cricket, their careers are being governed by discretion rather than rules. Women should not have to choose between motherhood and a career or between silence and a career.

Amid mounting questions, we must account for citizens drawn into Russia's war



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■ JANNATUL NAYM PIEAL

Abdullah Al Mamun of Lalmonirhat flew to Russia on May 7 with 29 other men, hoping for a better life. Then he ended up in a military camp there. The day before he was sent to the front, he rang his younger brother back home. "If we do not meet in this world, we will meet on the Day of Judgement," he told his family. Later, a man who had travelled with him informed them that Mamun was dead. His village arranged a "gayebana" janaza, but since no one could confirm his death, only "munajat" was offered instead. Five months on, his wife has a one-year-old son, debts she cannot pay, and a husband whose body she has not seen.

Recently, the UN's Commission of Inquiry on Ukraine told the General Assembly's Third Committee that it had compelling evidence that Russian authorities, working with recruiting agents in several countries, had trafficked men from 29 countries, including Bangladesh, into the Russian armed forces. The commission examined recruitment from 48 countries and drew on 245 testimonies, along with visas, travel records, and contracts. Among the documents it obtained were business visas issued to Bangladeshi recruits, claiming that a Russian civilian company had invited them. The men were offered jobs, charged recruitment fees, and put on flights, sometimes within days. Once in Russia, many were presented with one-year contracts with the defence ministry, written entirely in Russian. Their passports and phones were often taken away before they signed. Moscow has rejected the report, saying it does not recognise the commission.



FILE VISUAL: **ANWAR SOHEL**

For Dhaka, the question now is what to do with these findings. And it all begins with acknowledging the fact that they report does not give us the whole picture. It does not say how many Bangladeshis were trafficked, killed, or went missing. It also excludes men who knowingly joined the Russian forces. That omission is quite significant because Bangladesh's ambassador in Moscow told *Prothom Alo* that more than 90 percent of workers go to the war willingly. Russian citizenship and monthly earnings of several lakh taka are powerful attractions for people struggling to find work at home. But accepting a job offer is not consent to being sent to war. The commission found that recruits from different countries were given the same contracts. Some received as little as 20 minutes of military training, while others trained for a month. The commission says these men became members of the Russian armed forces once they signed, even when they were under pressure. They are soldiers, not mercenaries, and should be treated as prisoners of war if captured. Their home countries, it says, should treat them as victims rather than prosecute them.

The most basic question also remains unanswered: how many Bangladeshis have gone to Russia and ended up in its war? The Bureau of Manpower, Employment and Training (BMET) issued 7,949 clearances for Russia between January 2025 and October 27, 2026. That is a record of clearances, not a count of men who were trafficked to Russia. According to Shariful Islam Hasan, associate director of Brac's Migration Programme, it is very important for the government to trace around 8,500 people who travelled legally to Russia over the past two years. BMET recorded 4,727 workers travelling to Russia in 2025 alone, up from 1,395 in 2024. Meanwhile, Russian work permits issued to Bangladeshis rose to 9,300 in 2025, from 2,800 the previous year, according to figures reported by *The Moscow Times*. These figures measure different things, but the gap underlines how little the available data tells us about the full flow of workers. Fortify Rights and Truth Hounds identified at least 104 recruits and 34 deaths between May 2025 and February 2026. *Prothom Alo* has confirmed at least 54 deaths over three years. The Special Response Battalion says 20 of the 30 men who left in May have died. These are partial counts from different sources and periods. The UN commission says it sent governments 69 letters about the recruitment of foreign nationals into the Russian armed forces and received only six replies. As Bangladeshis, we have the right to know if our country was among the respondents.

India, at least, is trying to establish what happened to its citizens. On October 9, its foreign ministry said around 259 Indians had been recruited, 139 had returned home, and talks were underway for another 69. Its Supreme Court is overseeing a compensation process. The government has told the court that 51 Indians are dead and 77 cannot be traced. Russia has processed six compensation claims. There is no reason to take comfort from any of these numbers. But the figures are on record, the government has had to answer questions, and families have a process through which they can seek compensation. Bangladesh has none of this. Russia has reportedly given our embassy details of 40 Bangladeshis who are dead or missing, without saying which is which. The Wage Earners' Welfare Board has received not a single application to bring a body home. Families cannot prove their relatives have died, so they cannot claim burial grants, compensation or insurance. They had to pay an average of Tk 10 lakh to send their men abroad. They are now left with the debt and no reliable account of what happened to them.

The government cannot plead ignorance of its obligations. Bangladesh joined the Palermo Protocol in 2019 and has had an anti-trafficking law since 2012. Prosecuting recruiters, warning jobseekers, seeking the discharge of victims, and protecting them from punishment are not new ideas imported from Geneva. They are part of what Bangladesh has already committed itself to doing. The government has cancelled the licences of three agencies, and police have arrested two men, which is appreciable. But who recruited the men through those agencies? Who collected the money? Who arranged the flights and put them in touch with people in Russia? The commission describes a chain involving recruitment agents, transit countries, and Russian officials. Two arrests cannot be the end of an investigation into a chain like that.

There is also a question Dhaka needs to answer about its own priorities. In the same month that the government cancelled the agencies' licences, Bangladesh and Russia were discussing an increase in the number of Bangladeshi workers in Russia, from around 10,000 to as many as 100,000. More jobs abroad may sound like good news in a country where so many young people struggle to find work. But what safeguards would protect those workers? Who would make sure a man recruited as a civilian worker does not end up in a military uniform? These are not minor details to be worked out later, and Dhaka should press Moscow for answers, including why Bangladeshi men were made to sign contracts they could not read. A UN report should not have to expose the dangers before the government acts to protect its citizens.