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FOUNDER EDITOR: **LATE S. M. ALI**

A window of opportunity closing

Bangladesh is running out of time to utilise its demographic dividend

According to a new report by the World Bank, Bangladesh's working-age population will reach its highest proportion in 2045, after which the number of elderly people will continue to increase and the country will be termed an "aged" society. Between 2000 and 2024, the rise in working-age people added about 0.4 percentage points a year to per-capita real GDP growth. But this contribution is expected to halve between 2025 and 2044, before turning negative starting in 2045. The question is: has Bangladesh been able to make use of its demographic advantage thus far? The answer, disappointingly, is a solid "no".

With around 84 percent of Bangladesh's working population employed in the informal sector, more than 60 percent of people with a post-secondary education are forced to enter informal employment, earning 45 to 84 percent less than those in the formal sector. Meanwhile, female labour-force participation stands at only 38 percent. The future appears even bleaker given that 51 percent of children are unable to read and understand a simple text by the age of 10. According to the report, pre-primary school enrolment rate in Bangladesh is only 36 percent, the lowest among South Asian countries and much lower than the regional average of 62 percent.

The country will enter the "ageing" stage next year, when people aged 65 and above will account for 7 percent of the population. By 2051, this proportion will double. The transition from "ageing" to "aged" will take place over just 24 years, much faster compared to the average of 32 years for other developing economies and 46 years for advanced economies.

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Seen together, the numbers presented in the World Bank's report signal how ill-prepared Bangladesh is to support an ageing population over the next two decades and beyond. The country's infamously high out-of-pocket healthcare expenditure—around 79 percent, more than any other South Asian country—might only get worse and continue to erode working people's income. Meanwhile, even though 70 percent of the population lives in rural areas, urban areas reportedly have 18 times the doctor density. Very few adults in Bangladesh save specifically for old age, and even fewer working-age people contribute to a formal pension scheme.

The government must review the findings and projections of the aforementioned report and immediately strategise for a more secure future for the people of Bangladesh. Jobs must be created in the formal sector which can absorb the high number of qualified young people currently settling for informal jobs or unstable entrepreneurship. Women must also be supported to enter the workforce. Healthcare spending should account for at least 5 percent of the budget, and soon. Major education sector issues, such as teacher shortages and secondary school dropouts, must be addressed quickly, and social protection must be expanded to benefit disadvantaged groups. Without such measures, not only will our demographic dividend pass us by, but we will be left with inadequate resources to care for an increasingly older population over the coming decades.

Close the gaps in lead pollution control

Poor import monitoring, market surveillance endangering public health

That Bangladesh has virtually no way of detecting lead chromate, a toxic pigment used in paints and coatings, in imported paint because the country lacks the necessary customs classification is alarming, given the substantial health risks associated with this toxic heavy metal. It is also frustrating, as the dangers of lead poisoning have been reiterated in the country for decades. Just last year, a study involving about 500 children aged two to four years in Dhaka found that around 98 percent of them had concerning levels of lead in their blood. Bangladesh is also among the most lead-contaminated countries in the world, with an estimated 3.6 crore children (more than half of the total child population) having elevated blood lead levels. The fact that such a toxic chemical is being allowed to enter the country unregulated shows an unacceptable level of regulatory and administrative oversight.

Lead chromate is an inorganic chemical compound that is used to produce bright yellow, orange, and red colours in paint, coating, plastic, and other products. High concentrations of lead chromate have also been found in spices such as turmeric in Bangladesh, although coordinated action from the government managed to significantly reduce such prevalence—which points to a hopeful outcome where, with administrative and regulatory coordination, the use of the compound in consumer products can be reined in.

However, exposure to lead can happen in several ways, which makes containing the contamination significantly challenging. For instance, informal lead-acid battery recycling remains one of the major sources of exposure, with a rapidly increasing number of electric three-wheelers accounting for roughly 60 to 65 percent of local demand. It doesn't help that, in Bangladesh, lead chromate is grouped under a broader classification code that also covers non-lead chromium pigments, making it impossible to determine import volumes. Additionally, one recent study highlighted that small paint manufacturers often purchase pigments through chemical traders, making supply chains difficult to trace.

Therefore, to regulate a substance as hazardous as lead, the government should start by approving mandatory lead limits for all sorts of paints (currently, only decorative paint has a specified lead limit of 90 parts per million). Stronger import monitoring, market surveillance, and product identification can help control lead chromate trade. This effort can be strengthened by routine laboratory testing and introducing green taxation to encourage industries to adopt lead-free materials, along with providing technical support to paint manufacturers who seek safer alternatives.

Can we establish a uniform minimum wage for all workers?



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■ **APARAJITA DEBNATH**

With the newly constituted minimum wage board for the RMG sector pledging to implement a revised wage structure for workers from January 2027, amid persistent protests by a section of the workers, it is worth examining Bangladesh's prevailing wage protection regime that remains fragmented, selective, and structurally inadequate. While the RMG sector dominates the wage discourse, millions of workers in informal, service, and emerging sectors remain outside meaningful legal protection. It is, therefore, high time the government introduced a uniform national minimum wage alongside a statutory hourly wage system applicable across all sectors.

The primary legislation protecting workers' rights in Bangladesh is the Labour Act, 2006, which was amended by the interim government and subsequently passed in parliament as the Bangladesh Labour (Amendment) Act, 2026. Although the amended law introduced some key reforms in the interest of workers, it does not establish a universal minimum wage. Instead, it retains the existing mechanism of a Minimum Wages Board that recommends minimum wage rates on an industry-by-industry basis. Wage rates vary significantly depending on industry, skill, and region, and become binding only after the issuance of a government gazette notification.

The practice has resulted in significant disparities, however. For example, the minimum monthly wage for entry-level garment workers is Tk 12,500, while minimum wage rates in other industries vary considerably, with many occupations having no separate statutory minimum wage. Workers in informal sectors are also often completely excluded from such safeguards. Moreover, existing wage rates frequently fall short of what's needed to attain a decent standard of living. The estimated living wage for urban Bangladesh is Tk 30,459 per month, according to the Global Living Wage Coalition's 2025 benchmark, which illustrates the gap between prevailing minimum wages and the income needed to afford decent living. Besides failing to establish a universal minimum wage, the law also does not prescribe a statutory minimum hourly rate, including for those who are paid on a daily or piece-rate basis, such as tea garden workers, day labourers, bricklayers, etc.

Our wage system, long anchored in monthly salaries and piece-rate calculations, is increasingly being scrutinised for structural shortcomings that leave large segments of the workforce vulnerable. Although monthly wages are technically based on standardised working hours—typically eight hours a day and 40-48 hours a week—the system operates with a degree of opacity that creates significant room for exploitation. Overtime is often unpaid, informal workers fall outside enforceable protections, and those engaged in flexible or irregular employment arrangements are left without a clear benchmark for fair compensation. In effect, the absence of a standardised hourly wage obscures the true value of labour.

Moreover, female workers are paid less than their male counterparts in some occupations. According to the World Bank, women in Bangladesh also have a significantly lower labour force participation rate (42.5 percent) than men (81.3 percent), and are more likely to be unemployed. In this context, a uniform national wage framework could help reduce discriminatory wage disparities across sectors and strengthen equal rights and protections for all.

The existing wage regime also diverges from established standards set by the International Labour Organization (ILO). Key conventions such as Nos. 131, 100 and 111 address minimum wage protection, equal remuneration, and non-discrimination in employment and occupation, respectively. Together, they promote broader and more inclusive protection under international labour standards. However, Bangladesh's sector-based approach, fragmenting wage regulation across industries, leaves many workers effectively unprotected. Bangladesh has yet to ratify ILO Convention № 131 (the Minimum Wage Fixing Convention); it is high time it ratified and implemented it.

Experiences from neighbouring countries are instructive here. India chose wage consolidation through its Code on Wages, 2019, which provides for minimum wages across all sectors and equal pay regardless of gender. The Code consolidated four earlier statutes into a single framework and provides for a national floor wage below which no state-set minimum wage can fall. However, although passed in 2019, the Code's principal provisions came into force only in November 2025. Even now, it is being switched on state by state, with much of industrial India still drafting its rules.

Pakistan, on the other hand, allows its provinces to set their own minimum wages following the devolution of labour-related powers under the 18th Constitutional Amendment in 2010. This, however, resulted in variations in wage-setting frameworks and rates across provinces, while enforcement remains a persistent challenge.

These experiences suggest that establishing a legal minimum wage is only a first step. A national wage policy must set an adequate benchmark and be backed by effective enforcement to ensure that workers actually receive what they are entitled to.

The argument for such reforms is not just economic or administrative. A universal wage framework would be consistent with our foundational constitutional principles, including equality before the law (Article 27) and the right to life (Article 32), which the Supreme Court of Bangladesh has interpreted to encompass the right to a basic, dignified standard of living and the means to survive. In this sense, wage reform is as much about advancing constitutional principles as it is about modernising labour policy.

The Bangladesh Labour (Amendment) Act, 2026 should, therefore, be amended further to introduce a national minimum wage provision, establish an hourly wage standard, and recognise part-time employment. Institutionally, the Minimum Wages Board could be restructured into a more powerful National Wage Commission with jurisdiction across all sectors. Enforcement mechanisms also need strengthening, including through digital wage-tracking systems and stricter penalties for non-compliance. Without such reforms, growing frustration over inadequate wages will continue to spill onto the streets.



Police and garment workers demanding a minimum monthly wage of Tk 30,000 face off again in Gazipur, on November 4, 2026. PHOTO: **RASHED SHUMON**

Why we must forge a new economic vision



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■ **SAYEEFUL ISLAM**

Over the past four decades or so, the push to build a strong readymade garment (RMG) industry in Bangladesh has succeeded beyond our imagination. What began as an ambitious effort by a handful of pioneering entrepreneurs transformed an impoverished, agrarian nation into a global apparel export powerhouse. The sector has generated millions of jobs, brought women from rural communities into the formal workforce, and became the backbone of our export economy. But the world that rewarded that model is now disappearing before our eyes.

Our entire economic edifice rests on foreign exchange from two primary sources: RMG and remittances. Both face existential challenges.

In manufacturing, the traditional ladder—from apparel to electronics, consumer appliances, and automobiles—has been disrupted by robotics and AI. China's fully automated "dark factories" have already challenged traditional manufacturing models, including those of legacy automotive giants like Volkswagen and General Motors, by producing around the clock with minimal human intervention. Similar disruption is approaching our factory floors. As robotic sewing, automated cutting, and nearshoring take hold across Western consumer markets, our low-cost labour advantage could soon evaporate.

At the same time, the overseas construction sites, logistics hubs, and service sectors employing millions of our migrant workers in the Gulf and across Southeast Asia are also undergoing automation. If our workers remain un-upgraded, relying solely on basic manual labour, remittance inflows may rapidly decline.

To survive, we must fundamentally reset our economic vision. If machines are taking over physical assembly, we must focus on what machines cannot readily replicate: human-centric services, scaled and accelerated by artificial intelligence. Our greatest demographic asset is a median age of 26. Meanwhile, Western nations face an ageing crisis—a "silver economy" increasingly short of certified caregivers, healthcare assistants, and digital clinical operators.

People ask how we can compete with India or the Philippines, who established strong positions in these fields decades ago. The answer lies in recognising that their models were built around conventional economics of the past: large physical campuses, bureaucratic training centres, and years of expensive classroom-based instruction. But technology has opened up alternatives to that model. Healthcare in the West is changing rapidly—caregivers can no long rely on static, outdated routines. They must be continuously retrained to work alongside digital monitoring tools, smart diagnostics, and automated patient records. AI makes this continuous, decentralised learning possible.

With Bangladesh's nationwide digital connectivity, any young person with a smartphone can access an AI-powered personal tutor. Generative AI voice tools can teach English, German, or Japanese through real-time conversation, while modular courses can cover patient handling, anatomy, hygiene, modern clinical protocols, etc. Crucially, AI tools can assess trainees continuously and consistently. Prospective overseas employers could also verify and monitor the learning and assessment process remotely, helping our youth obtain credible, internationally recognised certification without leaving their home districts.

Once they complete the theoretical training, learners can undertake practical apprenticeships at local upazila health complexes and district hospitals. This would provide essential hands-on experience under the supervision of domestic doctors and nurses while helping to strengthen our own overburdened healthcare facilities. The result could be a certified, adaptable workforce ready to enter labour corridors abroad or take up remote digital health roles.

The same virtual approach could be used to retrain overseas workers, equipping them with the technical skills needed to operate modern, automated machinery on foreign job sites before their existing skills become obsolete.

Realising this vision requires immediate, structural reform within our government. The Ministry of Foreign Affairs must overhaul the structure and mandate of the economic wings in our overseas missions. We cannot afford slow, bureaucratic reporting channels. If trade and labour market reports take months to move through diplomatic red tape, they can become useless. Our missions must function as real-time economic intelligence units, feeding ground-level information on automation trends, factory closures, workplace technology adoption, and regulatory shifts directly into domestic policymaking.

While the government's efforts to increase education spending and introduce basic technology into primary schools are welcome, funding must expand dramatically. Digital literacy, AI-driven learning tools, and modern problem-solving must be integrated into our schools from the outset.

Four decades ago, some of us in the RMG industry took a leap in the dark because we knew exports were our only lifeline. Today, while having physical infrastructure such as deep-sea ports and expressways is vital, concrete alone cannot sustain an export-led economy whose foundations are shifting beneath it. We may lack the fiscal resources to build multi-billion-dollar semiconductor plants, but we can, and should, think ahead. If we read the writing on the wall in Europe, we can see that social unrest there is largely driven by economic insecurity and demographic pressures. In Bangladesh, if we fail to equip our large young population with a viable future, the consequences could be impossible to contain.

They say the only way to predict the future is to create it! So, shall we create our own future, or wait for the fires raging in Europe to spread to our streets? The choice is still ours, but not for much longer.

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