

How many rape cases are too many?

Time to put patriarchy on trial

WE are outraged at yet another deplorable incident of rape of a university student near what is one of the busiest thoroughfares in Dhaka, reinforcing just how unsafe the city, and indeed the whole country, has become for women and girls. In fact, we are outraged at how often we have to express our outrage at such incidents of violence against women, without seeing any changes in our behaviours, norms and policies. Each day, each week, each month—the numbers simply keep piling up. Just last year, 1,413 women and girls were raped or gang-raped, 76 were killed after rape, and 10 died by suicide. And let's remember, these are only the reported cases, meaning they denote only a fraction of the actual number of such incidents that take place in the country. There's no denying that only a handful of atrocious acts of violence capture the headlines and the public imagination—and even fewer of these ever see the light of justice.

We join the protesters in Dhaka University and around the country in demanding exemplary punishment and an end to the culture of impunity that emboldens rapists. A gender sensitive and responsive legal framework is the need of the hour—we need to challenge discrimination and inequality in rape law, address procedural barriers to accessing justice for survivors, and redress rape by ensuring punishment, deterrence, and reparation. But beyond, we must put an end to the victim-blaming attitude that pervades throughout society as well as our justice system which puts the onus on the victim rather than the perpetrator and insists on framing rape within the context of morality, honour and modesty of a woman. We categorically say, rape has nothing to do with what a woman was wearing, where she was, who she was with, at what time of the day, whether or not she was in a relationship and so on. It has everything to do with a patriarchal society that believes in the subjugation, control and exploitation of women and girls, by laws, norms and customs and by force, when necessary. If we are truly serious about putting an end to violence against women, we must change the way we think about women and their rights; we must challenge the institutions, including our families, education and legal systems, which perpetuate women's subjugated status.

No more single-use plastics

Develop biodegradable alternatives

WE welcome the High Court's directive to the authorities to ban single-use plastic products in coastal areas, hotels, motels and restaurants across the country within a year. The directive also called for the ban on polythene or throwaway plastic bags to be strictly enforced by the government.

Unfortunately, despite the various health and environmental hazards posed by plastic products, and the existing ban on the use of polythene and throwaway plastic bags, we have hardly seen any difference as these products continue to be used widely. And the government must take a large portion of the blame for this, as it has not done enough to discourage the use of plastic products, nor incentivised enough the use of other alternatives. Under these circumstances, it is a seminal verdict from the HC.

At the end of the day, the use of plastic poses a massive long-term threat to the environment. Scientists have been warning governments for decades to cut back on their use, and to find alternatives so that plastic products can be replaced altogether. And numerous governments have responded positively to their calls—but then, why can't we?

The government has to play a proactive role if the use of plastic is to be eradicated, which is an absolute necessity. It is high time we used substitutes such as jute, which, in fact, simultaneously provides us with the perfect opportunity to revive the development of our jute products.

We have seen good examples being set by certain mega-shops in this regard. And the government should incentivise others to do the same.

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

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A sad start to the New Year

Just one week into the oh-so-full-of-hope New Year, and we already have a long list of incidents that took place around the world and within Bangladesh which are enough to fill us with sorrow. The raging bushfire in Australia was a tragedy that marked the beginning of the year. It was soon followed by the US embassy attack and the unrest between the US army and the Iraqi supporters of pro-Iranian factions. The killing of a top Iranian general by the US now had us all on the edge of our seat, triggering fear if it will lead to a new war which could eventually lead to a world war. Also, the severe attack by masked men on Jawaharlal Nehru University students and teachers has escalated tensions surrounding India's controversial new citizenship law and National Register of Citizens (NRC). Not to mention the ongoing protests in Hong Kong, Chile and elsewhere.

Then there is all the local news of horror and tragedy. Recently, six people including four members of a family were killed as a microbus collided head-on with a bus in Faridpur Sadar upazila. An eighth grader who was allegedly raped by three men in Lohagara upazila tried to commit suicide and later died in hospital while undergoing treatment. Another incident saw a sixth grader die by suicide in Panchagarh Sadar upazila, hours after she was allegedly raped by her neighbour. Not to mention the rape of a Dhaka University student on Sunday night near Kurmitola General Hospital. It saddens me to even write about all this, but the reality is harsh. The aforementioned incidents, among many other reported and unreported ones, make me scared of what lies in our future.

Zeenat Alam, by email

NO STRINGS ATTACHED



AASHA MEHREEN AMIN

EVEN before we can catch our breath as we enter a new year, a new decade, rape continues to haunt us, reminding us of its insidious entry into every lonely corner, street, open area, swamp, abandoned building or roadside bush. An ordinary Sunday evening turns out to be a terrifying nightmare for a Dhaka University student who gets off at the wrong bus stop. Instead of getting down at Sheora (near the airport), she gets off at Kurmitola. It is while she is walking down the footpath, possibly trying to figure out how she will go to Sheora where her friend lives and where she is supposed to go to study, that her attacker pounces on her, drags her into a bush, rapes her and leaves her unconscious. Marks on her body and other evidence indicate that her attacker tried to strangle her.

Now she lies in a hospital, injured and traumatised. Students are protesting loudly, parents are paralysed with fear for their daughters, the minister promises to catch the culprits and seminars are being arranged to talk about this epidemic of rape. It is a re-run of the same story. Over and over again.

The most mindboggling part in this ongoing catastrophe is that we already know most of the reasons why rape has become such an "easy" crime to get away with. It is being called a "social disease" that has been allowed to spread and intensify—the number of rapes doubled in 2019—because the system protects the rapists, not the victims. There is full-scale impunity when it comes to the rapists. They are the ones who can use the loopholes in the system because they are men and hence supremely entitled to enjoy the elevated status given to them by birth from society. The comments under social media posts after a rape incident, including the one involving the DU student, reflect the misogyny that stems from various offshoots of patriarchy, including chauvinistic misinterpretations of religion. But these misguided, bigoted men conveniently ignore the reality of small children, girls and boys being raped inside their homes by relatives or neighbours or even inside the madrasa by teachers assigned to teach their wards about morality and religion. They also ignore the young women who follow religious dress codes and abide by religious conventions and who still become victims of sexual assault, rape and even murder. The names of Tonu and Nusrat keep coming to mind but there are many others whose names we will never know.

Rape, moreover, is being normalised as if a female is always susceptible to this disease as long as certain X, Y, Z factors are present—a lonely path, being alone at home, stepping outside the house, daring to want to get an education or earning a living. Just the day after the news of the DU student's rape, there was another report of a sixth grader, only 13 years old, being raped by a 20-year-old neighbour and found hanging from a tree; the assumption being that she committed suicide. The rapist in this case has been arrested. Does the arrest guarantee justice for the child? Will

get immediate medical treatment and necessary tests done. Every public hospital all over the country must be fully equipped to conduct the required DNA test to identify the rapists. This is easier said than done, as many district hospitals do not have the facilities to conduct the tests, which means the evidence has to be sent to labs in other places leading to time delays causing the samples to be denatured. Although the so-called "two-finger" test, a highly unscientific, intrusive and humiliating procedure, to determine whether a female has been raped was banned by the

need to conduct immediate medical examination of rape victims. But it has still retained the outdated definition of rape and section 155 (4) of the Evidence Act which gives the defence lawyers the opportunity to establish that the victim is of "loose character" based on arbitrary observations that could include the clothes she wears or her lifestyle. Such archaic elements have to be removed from the law if it is to have any significant impact in this bleak scenario.

A Dhaka University student being raped and left unconscious in a busy area speaks volumes of just how far this social



Students under the banner of Dhaka University Central Students' Union (Ducusu) hold a candlelight vigil on the Central Shaheed Minar premises, demanding justice for a fellow student who was raped in the capital's Kurmitola area on Sunday night.

PHOTO: ANISUR RAHMAN

his punishment, even if it is the death penalty, bring solace to the parents? Will one or two death sentences really reduce the number of rapes in this country?

These are not easy questions to answer. But while the legal system is not helping bring down the number of rapes, it is perhaps the best bet to deter future rapists. For this, a major overhaul within the system is required. Law enforcers must be instructed to deal with victims with sensitivity and respect; women police should handle cases of rape and sexual assault (this is already happening in some police stations). Police must make sure evidence is not destroyed by taking the victim to a hospital to

High Court following a writ petition by human rights organisations in 2018, in the absence of proper laboratories, this medieval practice continues in most parts of the country as the first test to establish that a rape has indeed taken place.

The law(s) on rape also have to be reformed to be tailored to our present reality. The Nari O Shishu Nirjatan Daman Ain 2000 (Prevention of Women and Child Repression Act) metes out the harshest punishment to rapists, and has introduced minimum victim protection measures such as the prohibition on disclosing a rape victim's identity, closed door examination of rape victims in court, and emphasised

disease has reached. It is an indicator of the failure of the state to protect the country's women and children. Better equipped laboratories, a gender-sensitive police force and a pro-victim legal system can make a huge difference in providing victims with the right legal support and identifying and punishing the rapists. But this will only be ensured if there is no scope for the legal system and its members to be manipulated by the rapists through money and influence. Only those at the helm of power can ensure this.

Aasha Mehreen Amin is Senior Deputy Editor, Editorial and Opinion, The Daily Star.

CLIMATE VULNERABLE FORUM

Time for a new direction as Bangladesh moves to take the helm

POLITICS OF CLIMATE CHANGE



SALEEMUL HUQ

THE Climate Vulnerable Forum (CVF) currently consists of 48 vulnerable developing countries from all the different groups of vulnerable countries under the United

Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC). The CVF was formed by then President Nasheed of the Maldives in 2009 in the run up to the fifteenth Conference of Parties (COP15) held in December 2009 in Copenhagen, Denmark, where we expected a new climate change agreement to emerge.

What President Nasheed did was to invite heads of government from around 20 key developing countries selected from each of the negotiating groups to a three-day meeting in Male, Maldives to strategise on one or two high-level advocacy demands on behalf of all the vulnerable developing countries. At the end of the meeting, the leaders decided to form the CVF with President Nasheed as its chair for the first two years. They also decided to focus on a single high-level advocacy message: to change the global long-term temperature goal from 2 degrees Centigrade to 1.5 degrees.

During COP15 in Copenhagen, Nasheed spearheaded the CVF leaders to press for this demand. Unfortunately, he was not successful in getting others to agree to the demand as both the developed and big developing countries failed to support us (it's interesting to note that this was the only point in which the presidents of both the US and China agreed with each other!).

However, Nasheed managed to insert a small paragraph at the end of the Copenhagen Agreement that said there would be a review of the long-term

temperature goal between 2013 and 2015. This paragraph allowed the UNFCCC Secretariat to set up a scientific group to examine the difference of impacts between 2 degrees Centigrade warming and 1.5 degrees, and the expert report was published in 2015 which showed that while 2 degrees was good enough to protect most of the world's countries and people, it would still affect many millions of people living in the poorest countries. Hence, 1.5 degrees was essential if the

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Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina of Bangladesh holds a meeting with her Dutch counterpart Mark Rutte on the sidelines of the 25th Conference of the Parties (COP25), in Madrid, Spain.

FILE PHOTO: PID

global leaders wished to protect all people on the planet.

This report then allowed the CVF, then under the leadership of President Aquino of the Philippines, to galvanise support at the beginning of COP21 in Paris, in December 2015, where we managed to get the long-term temperature goal down to 1.5 degrees Centigrade. This was a big achievement for the CVF.

As we move towards COP26, which will be held in Glasgow, Scotland in

the next two years, there are a number of things that should be taken into consideration. The first thing is to bring this role under the direct command of the prime minister's own office, with all the other relevant ministries such as environment, foreign affairs, finance, and planning playing a supportive role.

The second thing is for the prime minister to consider appointing a Special Envoy for Climate Change, as some countries have already done. For example, President Hilda Heine appointed her own daughter to the post in the Marshall Islands. The Special Envoy's role is not just to attend the annual COPs but rather to undertake high-level political diplomacy with all the major countries on behalf of the prime minister. He or she should have experience in international diplomacy and have the confidence of the prime minister herself. Expertise in climate change is not essential as that can be provided by the ministry of environment as well as the Expert Advisory Group of the CVF.

The third priority should be to immediately chalk out a two-year programme for Bangladesh's chairmanship of the CVF so that we can hit the ground running as soon as the responsibility of the chair is officially handed over to Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina in mid-2020.

Finally, it is important to remember that once that happens, we must become the spokesperson for all the vulnerable countries and not just promote Bangladesh alone. We should also change the narrative of the CVF by shifting our focus from our vulnerability to our resilience. Perhaps we can also weigh the possibility of changing the name of the group from Climate Vulnerable Forum (CVF) to Climate Resilient Forum (CRF)?

So as Bangladesh prepares to take up the challenge of chairing the CVF for

the next two years, there are a number of things that should be taken into consideration.

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