

Sexual violence and the misfortune of our children

A CLOSER LOOK



TASNEEM TAYEB

SEXUAL violence against women, unfortunately, has always been a pressing concern for our society. From putting up with indecent proposals and threats by lechers, both online and offline, and enduring sexual abuse in the safety

of one's bedroom at the hands of intimate partners, to rapes and gang rapes by people known and unknown—females undergo sexual violence in many forms and in many contexts. And while increasing sexual violence against women has reached sinister levels of permeation throughout society, the most at risk are little girls.

Girls as young as a few months old are subjected to sexual violence—at times by their own family members. For instance, there was the rape case of a nine-month old baby by her own maternal uncle in Chattogram's Fatikchhari upazila last year. When word of what had occurred got out, instead of showing support for the victim—who was too young to even realise what had happened to her, except the sharp pain—the community treated her and her family as outcasts. Instead of seeking justice for the infant girl, the locals decided to shun them.

Then there was the case of a four-year-old girl in Jashore Sadar upazila who had been raped by her own father in March this year. Her mother had been sleeping at that time. It was the victim's painful screams that alerted the family members. And in Singra upazila of Natore, a 16 year old girl was raped and then killed by her own paternal uncle last year. The family had gone to attend a funeral when the uncle decided it was time to act. He later hanged the body of the girl from the ceiling to give it the look of suicide.

Instances of young girls being subjected to social violence by cousins, extended family members, distant relatives, neighbours, and even school and madrasa teachers have become a very common phenomena. There

are times when young girls are not just raped but gang raped by heinous monsters, and then killed. Their battered, bruised, lifeless little bodies—often naked—are dumped into bins, bushes, jungles, or at times, even out in the open by the road side, perhaps for predators to further mutilate. The ones who are lucky are left alive to spend the rest of their lives bearing the scars on their souls and bodies. And this happens all over the country: you name it, and the place has a Pandora's Box ready to unleash tales of horror.

Unfortunately, Bangladesh has recently seen a sharp rise in incidents of rape of children. According to a Bangladesh Shishu Adhikar Forum (BSAF) report, 1,005 children were raped in the country in 2019. In 2018, the figure stood at 571. In the first half of 2020, BSAF recorded 365 cases of rape and sexual harassment of children. There were 227 cases of rapes, 60 instances of attempted rapes and 66 incidents of sexual harassment. There were also nine victims of child pornography. According to the same report, five of the rape victims committed suicide. Of course, the actual number would be higher than the figures presented in the report, as many families do not report such incidents due to the fear of social backlash.

Even when families try to report such cases, they are faced with manifold difficulties. Political affiliation of the perpetrators, their muscle power and the corrupt nature of unscrupulous administration and law enforcement personnel, deny victims the justice that is their right. There have been multiple instances when the police refused to take cases or even threatened the victims' families to remain quiet.

And even if the police records the case, chances of timely and exemplary justice being served remain slim. Remember the seven-year-old girl Saima who was, in July last year, lured to a vacant flat by Harun—the relative of one of her neighbours—who raped her and then killed her so that she could not disclose his identity?

A Dhaka court on March 9 finally served the culprit with the death penalty. While I personally still remember the smug look on the face of the perpetrator when he was being

taken into custody by the police on the same day—the photo, along with that of the victim, was on the front and back pages of most newspapers the next day—I don't know if the death penalty has been executed. It seems the fate of the culprit, along with the memory of the little girl, has become victim to the chronic amnesia the people of this nation suffer from.

And rape is just one of the many forms of sexual violence our children endure. The Interagency Working Group on Sexual

omission and associated to physical and psychological violence."

Going by this definition, how many of our children, especially girls, fall victim to sexual violence every day, and at the hands of how many perpetrators, we know not. And while the government needs to tighten the noose around sexual offenders—"Enforcing laws that protect children send a strong message to society that violence, exploitation and overall child neglect are unacceptable", says the Unicef website—, there is need for mass

At the directive of the Prime Minister, the Law Ministry is proposing the death penalty as the highest punishment for rape, instead of the current highest sentence of life term imprisonment. This will be part of an amendment to the Women and Children Repression Prevention Act 2000 that will be tabled at the next Cabinet meeting.

But even if this proposed amendment is enshrined into law, how effective it is going to be in preventing this heinous crime remains a question. The slow pace of resolving rape cases will be a major challenge for the government to overcome in addressing the problem of sexual violence against children. At least 3,136 children had been raped between 2015 and 2019; a meagre 164 of the cases had been disposed of till December last year.

And to eliminate this problem at its roots, we—as a society, as a nation—have to work towards creating an environment where a person learns to understand and respect another person's consent and rights.

The national media and the communities, especially schools, have a key role to play in this. But an initiative like this will not be possible without the strong political will of the government and concerned authorities: in fact, it is they who will have to take the lead in this. To end violence against children, we all need to come forward and eliminate the political, administrative and social elements that enable such practices.

As the world yesterday observed International Day of the Girl Child with the theme: "My voice, our equal future", to "reimagine a better world inspired by adolescent girls—energised and recognised, counted and invested in", I think of all the little girls who could not reach adolescence, all those little souls whose dreams were smothered by perpetrators of sexual violence.

As I come across so many news of violence against children every day, I am haunted by this one question: how many of our young girls will have to endure pain, torture and even death, before the nation is jolted out of its inertia and is forced to finally act?

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PHOTO: STAR

Exploitation of Children, Terminology Guidelines for the Protection of Children from Sexual Exploitation and Sexual Abuse, ECPAT International and ECPAT Luxembourg, Rachathewi, Bangkok, suggests that "Sexual violence against children encompasses both sexual exploitation and sexual abuse of children and can be used as an umbrella term to refer jointly to these phenomena, both with regard to acts of commission and

awareness about this social ill. Families, caregivers, guardians, neighbours, schools, the society and the government, must work together to raise awareness about the need to protect the rights of our girls. Unless we take holistic and multidimensional awareness measures—from the grassroots to the upper echelons of society—to end sexual violence against children, they will keep being subjected to pain and torture.

The impending return of PK Halder: A great learning moment

AN OPEN DIALOGUE



ABDULLAH SHIBLI

THE scandal involving Prashanta Kumar Halder, also known as PK Halder, a former managing director of NRB Global Bank, Reliance Finance and other companies, has been in the national news for almost a decade. Since 2014, he has

been reported to have gone into hiding in Canada with billions of Taka of investor money in his pockets. I have personally received communications from friends and relatives about the destitution and hardship brought about by Halder and his pyramid schemes.

Newspapers recently reported that PK Halder has sought the government's assistance in ensuring a safe return to face the courts in Bangladesh and straighten out business. In the first week of September, The Daily Star reported that Halder filed an application before the High Court (HC) through his attorney, seeking a HC order for ensuring "legal security of his life" should he return to the country to return the money and settle the transactions and liabilities with the company, International Leasing and Financial Services Limited (ILFSL).

If true, Halder is indeed a rare exception in that a so-called "robber baron" has voluntarily offered to return to the law-enforcing authorities to answer questions regarding shady business practices. He owes it to the people who trusted him and the employees he left in ruins. Not many of the world's modern-day tycoons do that. In Malaysia, former Prime Minister Najib Razak is being tried for stealing funds in the 1MDB political scandal. One of his collaborators, Jho Low, is still in hiding and the Interpol is working hard to track him down.

The case of Halder and his cohort possibly

involves corruption, tax evasion and abuse of power, which enabled him and his family to amass a huge sum of money through both legal and illegal means. The Anti-Corruption Commission (ACC) met with officials of People's Leasing and Financial Services to probe into graft allegations. Subsequently, at the ACC's request, the Bangladesh Financial Intelligence Unit (BFIU) has frozen the bank accounts of PK Halder and 82 other persons for their alleged involvement in money laundering and fund embezzlement.

from the state-owned Sonali Bank through various means, including fraud and deception. In other words, Bangladesh is earning the reputation of being a land where you can make money legally or otherwise, and get away with it. There is obviously an abundance of fraudulent and non-transparent practices.

According to media reports, PK Halder, who is residing in Toronto since July 3, 2014, recently sent a letter to the ILFSL indicating his willingness to return to Bangladesh

created much national and international interest. It can be hoped that the authorities will comply with the HC, taking adequate precautions to ensure Halder's safety and creating the proper environment for the truth to come out. It was reported earlier that Halder was assisted by numerous bank and other officials.

All this is great news for the stakeholders in this sordid affair. Halder's family, the investors, his staff, and anyone touched by the case have been spending the last few years in a state of uncertainty. It is said that Halder, who managed four financial companies, was running a pyramid scheme and his investors knew very well the risks involved in these so-called multi-level marketing companies. This will be a golden opportunity for all involved in the various financial companies to highlight the risks involved in these investment instruments, including stocks, bank deposits, Sanchay Patra, personal loans and others, and the associated risks and rewards.

On investigation, I discovered that the pyramid schemes have been around for many years, and has offered a lucrative avenue for retirees to earn income higher than those offered by the more traditional avenues. Some 34 non-bank financial institutions (NBFI) are now operating in Bangladesh after securing licences from the central bank, but many of them are struggling to survive in the absence of corporate governance. Earlier in 2018, the central bank also sought approval from the finance ministry to liquidate another NBFI—Bangladesh Industrial Finance Company (BIFC)—which was also facing severe liquidity crunch stemming from loan scams.

The Halder-run NBFI's problems first came to the surface in 2013-14, when some of its directors made off with more than Tk 1,000 crore by way of submitting fake documents, according to the Bangladesh Bank's inspection report. The NBFI called People's Leasing last paid dividends in 2014.

But the question that still remains a mystery is, how did the regulators miss the early warning signs?

On its website, the Federal Trade Commission (FTC) of the US government declares that multi-level marketing (MLM) or network marketing is a business opportunity that involves selling products to family and friends and recruiting other people to do the same, but warns that some MLMs are illegal pyramid schemes. Since childhood, we have known that these pyramid schemes or "hai hai" companies raise their heads after laying low for a period and manage "to fool some people, some of the time". The return and possible trail of Halder and his fellow co-conspirators provides an opportunity for civil society to learn how the likes of Halder and others have been able to fool investors for such a long time. It might also establish that the other part of Lincoln's famous saying is true: "You cannot fool all people all the time."

Most people who join legitimate MLMs make little or no money. Some of them lose money. People who become involved in a pyramid scheme may not realise they've joined a fraudulent venture and end up deeply in debt.

The trial and publicity after Halder's return will bring closure to a traumatic experience for the thousands who are hurting. It will also allow the investors an opportunity to share the hardships they underwent with others and warn the general public of the *modus operandi* of the scamsters. Finally, we need to know if PK Halder really is the con artist as portrayed in the media, or a scapegoat for the well-connected elite and other master criminals. Undoubtedly, his return and trial will bring back some much-needed transparency and uphold due process, providing a great learning moment.

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should he be granted protection by law enforcement and the courts. The board of directors of ILFSL has approved the letter and it placed the letter, along with an application, before the HC on September 7, 2020.

After a hearing, a HC bench granted the application to allow him to return to the country under its protection. It also indicated that further orders will be issued in the presence of the attorney general and the lawyers of the ACC, Bangladesh Bank and ILFSL. Halder will remain in the custody of the court after his return, and the HC bench asked ILFSL to inform it about his arrival time, date, flight number etc, enabling it to issue further orders.

This is a high visibility case and has

QUOTABLE Quote



NAGUIB MAHFOUZ (1911-2006)

Egyptian novelist and screenplay writer, who was awarded the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1988, the first Arabic writer to be so honoured.

Fear does not prevent death. It prevents life.

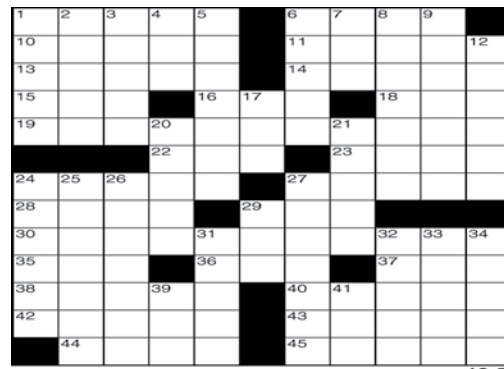
CROSSWORD BY THOMAS JOSEPH

ACROSS

- 1 Flexes
- 6 Ask for divine help
- 10 Poor sport's cry
- 11 Peruvian peaks
- 13 Less polite
- 14 Egypt's Anwar
- 15 Use a spade
- 16 Good times
- 18 Stretch of years
- 19 One who rips through pages
- 22 Early auto
- 23 Gum flavor
- 24 Deadly
- 27 Ties up
- 28 Without repairs
- 29 Visibility lessener
- 30 Pep rally participant

DOWN

- 35 Playground game
- 36 Owned by us
- 37 "Exodus" hero
- 38 Nebraska city
- 40 Merchandise
- 42 Twin of Romulus
- 43 Wonderland visitor
- 44 Red-ink amount
- 45 Signs a lease
- 9 Like some bonuses
- 12 Kicks off
- 17 Old hand
- 20 Make blank
- 21 Friendly seniority
- 24 Element
- 25 Red-faced
- 26 Reason for overtime
- 27 South African conflict begun in 1899
- 29 Winter ailment
- 31 Comic tribute
- 32 "Mack the Knife" singer Bobby
- 33 Put up
- 34 Gets up
- 39 Wheel part
- 41 Pub drink



YESTERDAY'S ANSWERS



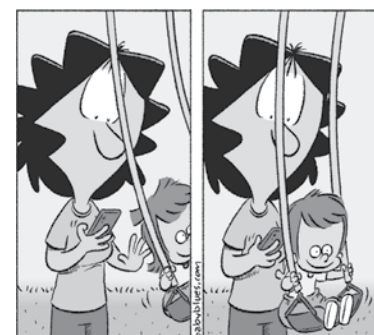
BEETLE BAILEY



BY MORT WALKER



BABY BLUES



BY KIRKMAN & SCOTT



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