

Violent speech begets violent nation

Why is there so much hate speech against women in Bangladesh?



SHUPROVA TASNEEM

THIS month, the release of a gang rape video in Noakhali forced us to take a long, hard look at ourselves and confront an ugly but often overlooked reality—women and children are falling victim to sexual violence on a daily basis in Bangladesh. The sheer brutality of the horrific footage inspired nationwide condemnation. People were shocked, ashamed and most of all, enraged.

This rage translated into protests across the country, inspiring debates on exemplary punishments for rapists, the politics of power and patronage that allows criminals to act with impunity, wider institutional reforms to ensure the justice system acts for victims and not against them, and the entrenched norms in our society that contribute to rape culture and asks the rape survivor to “share the blame” of the crime committed against them. This was especially scrutinised after two men from hugely different backgrounds, actor Ananta Jalil and Hefazat secretary general Junaid Babunagari, expressed similar views regarding the importance of women’s “decent” dress to avoid enticing men into violent crimes like rape.

In the midst of these heated debates, another less conspicuous but equally normalised thread of violence has emerged: the continuous and constant vitriol and hatred expressed online against women.

According to the UN Strategy and Plan of Action on Hate Speech: “the term hate speech is understood as any kind of communication in speech, writing or behaviour, that attacks or uses pejorative or discriminatory language with reference to a person or a group on the basis of who they are, in other words, based on their religion, ethnicity, nationality, race, colour, descent, gender or other identity factor. This is often rooted in, and generates intolerance and hatred and, in certain contexts, can be demeaning and divisive.”

The Gender Equality Strategy paper of the Council of Europe further elaborates on hate speech targeted at women: “Sexist hate speech takes many forms both online and offline, notably victim blaming and re-victimisation; “slut-shaming”; body-shaming;



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“revenge porn” (the sharing of explicit or sexual images without consent); brutal and sexualised threats of death, rape and violence; offensive comments on appearance, sexuality, sexual orientation or gender roles; but also false compliments or supposed jokes, using humour to humiliate and ridicule the target.”

The most obvious expression of online sexist hate speech in Bangladesh is the view that “certain kinds” of women invite rape upon themselves or deserve to be raped. These comments have been made about protestors criticising capital punishment as an easy-fix solution (what do they expect, walking around at night dressed like that?), about social media commentators questioning misogyny and entrenched sexist views (these women just mimic Western ideas and mix freely with men, then complain when they are raped), about activists trying to start conversations on marital rape (their husbands sure need to teach them a lesson), and about any woman in general who expressed a view that may not fit neatly into

certain traditional (read: patriarchal) ideas on society and women’s roles in it.

In all of these comments, a running thread is the demeaning and humiliating language used to reduce women into being nothing more than body parts, and the suggestion that women who do not behave in certain ways deserve to be punished somehow. The most widely discussed example of this in recent days was an alleged comment by a ruling party student leader at the Dhaka University campus on how “all women deserve to be free of sexual violence, except those with anti-liberation ideas.” Although the leader vehemently insisted he had been misquoted, the incident is not unrepresentative of the views of many men regarding women whose opinions and ideas they are not on board with.

This month, one example of this form of hate speech was widely circulated—a Facebook post titled “how to rape a girl” went viral, and one youth was subsequently arrested by Rab on October 11. This decision to use the Digital Security Act to shut down

such violent rhetoric against women was widely lauded online. However, this arrest only shows how indiscriminately the DSA can be used. Why arrest this one man only when there was pressure on the government to act on violence against women, when it is suggested that 73 percent of female users of online spaces in Bangladesh have faced some form of violence, and the numbers are continuously on the rise?

It must be stressed that in no way can one support the draconian DSA, which grants sweeping powers to the executive and the prosecuting authorities and allows them to arbitrarily decide offences according to vague and ill-defined criteria. However, we must remember that cyber harassment of women was cited often enough as a reason for enacting the DSA, yet there is nothing within the Act that actually criminalises it. The closest it comes to is the controversial Section 25, according to which, sharing “offensive or fear-inducing” information, or information that you know to be false, “with the intention to annoy, insult,

humiliate or denigrate a person”, can land you in jail for three years on the first count.

Have women not been annoyed, insulted, humiliated or denigrated enough online? Or do they not count as “persons”? Even as the poorly worded DSA opens up avenues to use it to silence differing opinions, it is ironic that it has mostly been wielded against journalists, cartoonists and musicians and not sadists and sexists who fantasise online about torturing women. If nothing, it once again proves that laws that clamp down on freedom of speech almost always end up targeting the wrong kind of speech, where hate continues but dissent gets drowned out.

The campaign of online verbal violence against women is not a new phenomenon. The issue is not just the existence of certain sexist views that are totally against the notion of equal rights for women and men (as enshrined in the Constitution), but that opposition to these views are so often met with blind hatred that quickly descends into violent language. The implication is that if women behave with any more agency than is desired, they must be put back into their place with the appropriate punishment. This desire to dominate and humiliate, to be obeyed or gain that obedience by force, is a classic trait of toxic masculinity that is all too prevalent in our society.

All of this is symptomatic of a society that has been seduced by violence and is now firmly in its grips. The dehumanisation of women that allows men to go online and identify rape victims who “deserved it”, or mock women who “complain” about being raped by their husbands (because how can you force yourself on someone who is already your property?), is the same dehumanisation that leads to rape in the first place. It is also this dehumanisation that pushes us to demand death penalty for rapists, or to say that drug dealers deserve extrajudicial killings rather than fair trials. Our violent tendencies manifest in different ways—sometimes as online hate speech, sometimes as considering certain classes of society as being sub-human and thus less deserving of justice, and sometimes as violence against women and children. It is all part of the same spectrum, and we cannot deal with one if we continue to wilfully ignore the others.

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Taking a ‘whole of society’ approach to tackling climate change



SALEEMUL HUQ

THE scale of the global climate change emergency that is emerging in 2020 has already made it clear that nothing short of a “whole of society” approach is needed if we are going to be able to tackle it effectively over the coming

decade, which is the crucial time window we have left.

While this whole of society approach is needed globally, it is also needed in each and every country as well. How can we do this for Bangladesh?

The first thing to note about thinking of involving the whole of society is that it puts the burden of thinking, planning and taking action on each and every conscious citizen of the country. It is an empowering notion that enables each of us to become an active player in the struggle against the global emergency.

It also means that we can no longer blame others, such as the government or authorities, for their inaction if we ourselves are also inactive.

The good news in Bangladesh is that from the Prime Minister to her ministers and bureaucracy, as well as legislature and judiciary and even the security forces—all the organs of the government are fully aware of the climate emergency and are well on their way to working out what each of them have to do about it. Thus tackling climate change is now embedded into a “whole of government” approach in Bangladesh.

A good example of this is that the finance minister has allocated over eight percent of the national budget across over 20 ministries

to help them tackle climate change in their regular annual activities. At the same time, the upcoming eighth Five Year Plan will enable climate change actions to be embedded across all major sectors, rather than being a standalone issue for the Ministry of Environment to handle alone.

We now need to move from a whole of government to a whole of society approach, where all the non-governmental sectors need to come on board as well. There are



a few main groups that need to be brought on board, many of whom have also started taking actions on their own already.

The first sector is the significant NGO and broader civil society sector in Bangladesh, which includes ones like BRAC (now the biggest NGO in the world) to thousands of smaller NGOs as well as community based organisations. The good news here is that

many of these NGOs in Bangladesh have pioneered the concept of Community Based Adaptation (CBA) and are in fact exporting their experience and knowledge to other developing countries as well. Of course, much still remains to be done but a good start has been made.

The second important stakeholder group are the media, which provides information to the citizens to enhance their knowledge, both about the problems as well about the



PHOTO: COLLECTED

solutions related to climate change. Many major media houses in Bangladesh have been covering the climate issue for a number of years and as a result, the people of this country have a high level of awareness when it comes to climate change.

This was made clear to me when I attended the Climate Summit in Paris, France in 2015 where the famous Paris Agreement

was finalised. During the two weeks of the summit, we were a few thousand delegates and observers meeting every day in a former airport on the outskirts of Paris, while the citizens of Paris went about their daily life oblivious to what was happening inside the conference venue. On the other hand, there were correspondents from several private television channels from Bangladesh as well as from newspapers, who had gone to the conference at their own expense and were sending despatches on the ups and downs of the negotiations on a daily basis to their viewers and readers back in Bangladesh. The general public in Bangladesh were keeping abreast of the climate negotiations more than the people of Paris where they were taking place!

The other major sector that has to now be brought on board in a much more significant manner is the private sector, from which we need to generate both investments as well as solutions to tackle climate change in practice. Here also we already have some excellent examples, particularly in the solar home systems arena where more than five million households have purchased solar home systems from private companies, who have generated a significant number of green jobs as a result. There is plenty of scope to scale this up several fold over the coming years.

The other arena where there is a lot of unexplored scope is in addressing adaptation, where companies working in agriculture as well as insurance can play a role. All such investments need to be scaled up by the banks and investment sector, who have to add to their knowledge and understanding of the opportunities for profit making and job creation in tackling climate change.

The final sector is education, which includes universities, colleges and schools, where our younger generation needs to

be educated and empowered to become future Climate Champions. Again, there are a number of excellent Initiatives that can be scaled up here. One is the Gobeshona Initiative, where over 50 universities and research institutions have come together to share knowledge on climate change research. They hold a major annual conference each January to disseminate their research findings to decision makers. Another initiative is the Bangladesh Youth Adaptation Network (BYAN), which is a part of the global Youth Adaptation Network and will be taking the messages from Bangladesh to the Youth Climate Summit to be held in Milan, Italy in September 2021.

Of course, the most important emphasis has to be on all the citizens of the country, including farmers, fishers, labourers and others. Each and every citizen must be able to understand the problem of climate change, as well as know what to do about it from their own perspective. The obvious opportunity here is to link the protection of natural land and water resources of the country while developing agriculture and fisheries in a Nature Based Solutions (NBS) approach that prevents and indeed reverses the ongoing destruction of our natural ecosystems.

Finally, there is an excellent opportunity for Bangladesh to link the climate change issue to the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), as well as to the eighth Five Year Plan, the 2041 Perspective Plan and the 2100 Delta Plan.

If done effectively, Bangladesh has the opportunity to show the world how to successfully mainstream tackling climate change into development through a genuine whole of society approach.

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QUOTABLE Quote

ERNEST HEMINGWAY
(1899-1961)
American novelist and short-story writer, awarded the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1954.

The best way to find out if you can trust somebody is to trust them.

CROSSWORD BY THOMAS JOSEPH

ACROSS
1 Hindu hero
5 Steller radio source
11 Not at home
12 Polished
13 One-liner, e.g.
14 To-do list
15 Hoppy brew
16 Revue segment
17 Visitor from afar
19 Toe count
22 Happen again
24 Eat from the pasture
26 Egg outline
27 Gumbo base
28 Nanny's mate
30 Traction aid
31 Building wing
32 Bewildered
34 Number between eins and drei

DOWN
1 Indian prince
2 Illegally off base
3 Phone someone
4 Supporter's vote
5 Tremble
6 Exhortation
7 Aid illegally
8 – Salvador
9 Linking word
10 Stephen of "The Crying Game"

35 Nourished
38 Egyptian landmark
41 Green stone
42 Early newsgroup system
43 Arm bone
44 Informal dances
45 Pleased

16 Knight's title
18 Temporary calm
19 Pretend to be
20 Poet Pound
21 Tidy
22 Spa wear
23 Wicked
25 Part to play
29 Boring event
30 CBS series with spinoffs
33 Phone messages
34 Fan publication
36 Writer Ferber
37 Out of play
38 Total
39 Letter before omega
40 Spell
41 Moonshine holder

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