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When Women Fear to Tread

by Aasha Mehreen Amin, Rahat Fahmida and Fayza Haq

In crime capitals of the world, women know the areas to avoid. No one who can avoid it is going to walk through Harlem at midnight. In Dhaka, such means of avoiding muggings, rapes and assault are fewer. Violent crime occurs in broad daylight, in the best of neighbourhoods. Our main issue now is the deteriorating situation of women's security in our capital city. Irrelevant of whether she is a housewife, a student or even a doctor or executive. In the eyes of the hijackers these women are simply vulnerable targets.

YOUNG girls between 9 and 18 are the most vulnerable. Incidents of rape, kidnapping and mutilation occur the most in the case of this group. Just looking through the pages of any daily gives one an idea of how frequently such gruesome acts of brutality occur and how easily the criminals get away with it. An acid thrower may get life term imprisonment and a rapist, a mere 10 years sentence. But with bribes and connections, these beasts are likely to go scot free much before their prison term — free to pounce on a new victim.

The streets of Dhaka have become unsafe for women no matter what their age. Because of this, most school-going girls travel with guardians. For some families, however, it is not always possible to make sure that their child is chaperoned. When there are three or four school-going children in a family, all going to different schools, guardians have to make a choice as to who will go unaccompanied. Invariably, it is the eldest teenaged daughter. Although parents do not feel happy about this, they have no other alternative.

But beyond the precautions lie the uneasy reasons. Why should one have to restrict one's way of life? Often after an assault, the victim is held partially responsible. It is all too easy to opt out that way and to forget that passive spectators, criminals, and a lethargic police force are responsible.

The girls themselves seem to have ambivalent feelings about their security. Tasleema, a 15-year-old, goes to Agrani Uchcha Balika Bidyalaya, all by herself from Farmgate. When asked whether she feels afraid when she travels alone she expresses her fear of trucks and buses on busy streets. But what about things like kidnapping, rape etc? Her answer to this is simple: "I just don't think about such things."

This kind of misguided complacency often proves to be very dangerous. On February 15th, an advertisement in a Bengali daily announced a substantial award for the return of an 11-year-old girl who had gone to her friend's house and did not come back. A few weeks later, the girl was found although the parents refused to say how, when or where. When asked what had happened to Baby (not her real name) while she had been held captive, the father says, "A girl of that age is kidnapped. Isn't the motive obvious? I don't want any publicity. My child has gone through enough. Just let us be. What is the use of writing about it in newspapers? Nothing will come of it." The fear of social stigma is almost always the reason behind unreported rapes or kidnappings.

The feeling of despair is shared by everyone, especially the victims themselves. In a television programme, 'Drishtikon' aired a few weeks ago, Azra Jabben, the magician who fought off a group of hijackers with her karate skills, not to mention extreme courage, expressed her disgust at the apathy of people: "What really shocked me was that a whole crowd was watching me being stabbed repeatedly and not a single person came forward to help. Why are people so cowardly, so indifferent?"

A few weeks ago another incident occurred that shows just how far this indifference can go. Gauri Rani, a young woman holding a clerical post, went to collect her salary from the Directorate of Health (Swastha Adhidaptar) in Mohakhali. When she was unable to do so an officer driver and darwan jeered at her making lewd remarks as to how she could get her money by pleasing the officer concerned in another way. Gauri Rani immediately complained to one of the officers and when she came downstairs from the office building, the same driver forced her into a car and took her to another office nearby where he and five others raped her. At the time when she was being abducted, there were people near the building, on the streets; but everyone seemed to be deaf to her screams. Later after she had been taken to Dhaka Medical College to be examined, the attendants at the hospital turned her away telling her that the office was closed and that she would have to come another day. The doctors at the DMC were unavailable for comment.

A sub-inspector of Gulshan Thana, who prefers not to have his name mentioned, says that most of these violent crimes against women are 'love related' with 'love' having a rather distorted meaning. In March, 13-year-old Raiza was burnt to death for refusing to marry Sharu — an employee of

Tiger Textile Mills in Gazipur. Cases of mutilation, rape and kidnapping, which the sub-inspector terms as peculiar crimes, have drastically increased. Unemployment and deterioration in morals, he adds, are the key catalysts for these heinous crimes.

Frightened Housewives

If there is one valid generalisation to be made about women it is that the overwhelming majority of them have been and are engaged in domestic food preparation, maintenance of the home and clothing, and — if they are mothers — in child-rearing. Single, married, or divorced, regardless of whether she holds a paid job or not, a woman is a housewife, at least part of her life. Even if she can afford to hire another woman to do her housework, the responsibility of running the household is hers. It is not possible for a housewife to completely abandon going outdoors altogether, fearing hijackers.

Raushan, who stays in Lalmita regularly fetched her sister-in-law's two children from their respective schools. She has been recently married and being a part time student of B. Com, quite liked her escorting duties. Until that horrifying afternoon when young hijackers took away her gold bangles and chain at dagger point, not even 250 yards

which is bureaucratic and social shoulder-shrugging.

Intimidated Working Women

Nadira Sultana, who was going to work at the Radio was accosted by some men who brandished pistols and knives, and made her hand over her gold bangles, earrings and watch. "I was so shocked by the violence and the aggressiveness of the encounter that I couldn't sleep at nights for weeks and stopped going to work for months. I was psychologically depressed, confused and positively intimidated," Nadira said.

Najma Haq, who teaches in a school in Mohammadpur, not far from her house, was coming back from a staff meeting at 4 pm, when she was confronted with a young man in a motor cycle with a dagger, demanding her money in her purse and her jewellery. Najma made no resistance. "What really frightened me most about the experience was that I knew the young man who took my possessions. He lived in the neighbourhood and I knew he had taken to drugs. I was scared about reporting the matter to the police and frightened sick about the whole incident because I feared that the young man would take revenge. It was all the more agonising and embarrassing because I knew the identity of the culprit. I

Commission, but they failed to take action. The people hijacked refuse to give their names to the newspapers for fear of revenge", she continued.

"A friend of mine, a few days back, was hijacked for the second time this year, at Panthopth while going to Green Road. She was accosted

ties in the police, upon investigation it was found that the two men were not traffic police but security guards at an embassy. I find this incident quite worrying," she added.

Sonia continued about the subject of hijacking. "A second incident took place at Kamal Ataturk Road at 9 a.m. An unknown car came and blocked

'mastans' who are involved in hijacking. Sons of well-to-do parents are also involved in this."

She added, "When caught and when the police try to apprehend, there are telephone calls from higher authorities in the political hierarchy. The police are then perplexed. If they don't release the culprit their job is in jeopardy. This is one reason why the security is not tight."

The Inspector General of Police, Mr Enamul Huq, informed 'The Daily Star' that the density of crime areas was found more in the suburbs like Mirpur, Demra and Shoubajgh. He said that there was no section on hijacking in the penal code as there was on robbery, extortion and theft. He bracketed hijacking with robbery and said that there were 951 cases registered in

are committed because people want to obtain property by unfair means. There are a lot of unemployed and adventurous people wanting to have fun," he said.

What was the reason for the crimes to step up? The IG police explained that this was because people do not respect women as they did before, as well as people becoming more acquisitive and wishing to get something out of others irrespective of age and sex. In areas like Kolabagan and Gulshan the women come out to work in thousands. This attracts the criminals, who prey on the most vulnerable. There are cases of crimes committed in Dhanmandi and Crescent Lake, specially during morning walks.

What was his advice to women to avoid such attacks?

would be such as to not invite problems. "I would advise them to be alert and to weigh the circumstances," he stressed.

It is often heard that people are caught one day and are back on the street again. What did the IG police have to say to that? "I only wish and hope that once a man is taken into custody he is dealt with reasonably so that he does not have a chance to do it again. The trend of recurring should not continue. People should know the rules and regulations and be aware of their rights and responsibilities. When there is a witness, he should be prepared to speak the truth during the investigation and the trial. People should help the police to help themselves," he commented.

Mr Enamul Huq found it natural for crimes like hijacking to be on the increase. "Let there be free registration of cases or there will be suppression," he commented.

Conclusion

While a number of legislative measures guarantee legal equality to women, in practice, however, hardly any opportunities are provided for women to learn their new roles. They are in a way tied down by insecurity of movement. Attempts to legislate, reform and enforce laws have tended to build on the assumption that society is against such phenomena, so law enforcement would reduce or delegitimise them. The state initiatives were accordingly directed towards making its executive functionaries more sensitive, judiciary more receptive and the law, in words, less sexist. This may create an illusion of progress or improvement, but it has not empowered women to halt the increasing violence and destruction in their lives. We need to know what the concerned authorities have done to transform their gender construction. Has it changed its formal and legal norms for possessive right of men over women, which denigrate and limit women as sub-human objects? Has it effectively delegitimised processes which are in agreement with the advocacy and interests of the ruling class and gender-oriented social structure, and made substantive policies for the development and liberation of women so that they can move about freely and securely?

Women involved in the liberation movement have increasingly realised that the phenomenon of violence against women will not be challenged without a struggle to end the subordination of women, to transform unequal social relations based on oppression and exploitation. We need a radical transformation in the organisation of not only the economy, but definitely a radical change in the structure of security and disciplinary rules. If a society is judged by the treatment and safety of its women, we are a sad and unforgivable failure.



by three boys carrying knives and 'ramdars'. This was at 9 a.m. and she yelled out for help but the onlookers were too frightened to do anything and the miscreants got away with her jewellery. It is now dangerous for women to wear any jewellery of any sort while going out in rickshaws or baby-taxis. It is also not safe travelling after dark," Jahanara further added.

Sonia Panthi, the owner of a boutique and a health club, was driving down Gulshan Avenue when the tyres burst and the car skidded. This was caused by pins thrown either by people on the side of the road or a bus that had passed by. I was hit and in a state of shock. The onlookers failed to come to my rescue. Out of the blue, a man in the garb of a police, appeared and asked for my licence and blue book. He suddenly hit a teenage rickshaw puller. He was then joined by a second person, also in uniform. The two suggested that they would take me to the police station and say I hit the boy unless I gave them Taka 1000. When I had paid up they got my tyres fixed and let me go," Sonia said.

"When the matter was reported to the higher authori-

my car from the front. At the same time a van blocked me from the back. The car got banded from the front and the nameplate fell off. The people from the two vehicles demanded money. The common feature is that they hit you and then they demand money out of you. I sat tight and hollered for help but the passersby were afraid to do anything. Fortunately, an office driver, who was passing by stopped to investigate. Seeing him they got into their vehicles and drove off. Upon investigation it was found out that the miscreant was a chauffeur, who caused mischief while driving back from school, having dropped the children. I know of other cases of single women drivers being victimised."

"Strangely enough," Sonia continued, "these incidents occur mostly in different areas of Banani, Gulshan and Dhanmandi. I've driven into Old Dhaka, even in a baby tax, with plenty of money, but I've never been accosted. Congested areas like Sadar Ghat, Nawab Bari and Islampur seem to be extremely secure, as far as women are concerned. Around Mohakhali, Raibazar, Kolabagan, and Lalmita, there are a lot of



1991 throughout the whole country, up from 828 cases in '90, 783 incidents in '89; 663 in '88 and 623 in '87. In a country with a population of 110 million people the figures appear rather low so that one can surmise that cases go unreported.

The IG explained that there were more women coming out to work in the garment factories. The percentage of women working in hospitals, schools and colleges, offices and in the NGOs had also gone up. "It was only natural that the rate of crime should go up. These crimes

Mr Enamul Huq suggested a number of remedies:

- Women should try to control the timing, circumstance and atmosphere and avoid lonely places as well as mobs. Walking early morning or at night was dangerous too.
- Those who can help it should get some companion and go out accompanied.
- There should be family awareness about where a woman is heading and alertness as to whether she is being followed.
- A woman's clothes, appearance and mode of conduct

Angels from the Bay

by Nadeem Qadir

shooting the next day, hours before our flight back to Dhaka. Agreed and happy, they went back to their business as usual.

Soon, I found them playing with marbles, a game I later found needed lot of attention, aim and precision.

"Can I join you guys for a game," I asked to their surprise, and it was nearly for two

house that I third to learn the sport, which was Gafur and his Gang's only entertainment. They are still too young to fancy the "nightly sports" that some choose to go about when in this town.

I was given seven marbles, six of which were to be thrown

near a circle at a distance of about two-feet across a line marked on the sand. What I did not know that I would be disqualified if the marbles went further the circle. Yes, I lost my very first marble game.

"Hey, c'mon guys give me another chance," I pleaded like a child, and I was not turned down or fined one

marble, as per the rules of the game. I tried and succeeded, but then I failed in the next step of the game, which is to hit one marble selected by the opponents by the seventh one in my hand.

I lost all my marbles and now had to wait for my chance which was taking a bit too long and marking this 'grown-up kid' a bit impatient. So, I pleaded for another try, of course without success. Neither I had the precision, nor total attention and above all, maybe my heart was not as big as theirs.

Others on the beach found the episode very amusing, but never joined and I can tell you they missed a lot of fun and of course the real speciality of Cox's Bazar.

And there was a lesson to learn too: Do not hesitate to make friends with an open heart, which is not easy to keep clean these days. And, of course, friends don't come in millions.

When I offered the kids some money to buy more marbles, they in exchange wanted me to take some of their souvenirs in real cut prices. Angels, aren't they? They kept the money only after I said it was a present and I would be happy if they accepted it. Muffy promised them copies of their picture.

It was, after all, not altogether a "new" trip. We had been gifted with the friendship of four worldly angels and as the poets say that there is nothing more precious in this world than a trusted friend.

The angels sure are trusted friends and may God bless them.



Cox's Bazar beach: Gafur (left) displays his souvenirs