

FOCUS

DAY OF RESISTANCE TO VIOLENCE AGAINST WOMEN

Let's Not Be Silenced Any More

by Shaheen Anam

According to press reports, violence against women and children has doubled in the last 5 years. On 8 March 1998, the Home Minister in a question-answer session in the Parliament admitted that from March to December 1997, 1743 women and children have been raped. Cases of acid attacks, gang rape or murder after rape have also increased.

FOUR years ago, on this day, August 24, 1995, 15-year-old Yasmeen was raped and murdered by a group of four policemen in Dinajpur, Dashmille. Women all over Bangladesh rose up in protest of this atrocity as did the general population of Dinajpur. The incident gave birth to the Sammiti Nari Samaj, a coalition of several women's organizations committed to resisting all kinds of violence against women and children.

During a huge rally in October 1995, Sammiti Nari Samaj declared August 24 as Violence Against Women Resistance Day (Nari Nirjaton Protirodh Dibash). Since then, the Day has been observed through rallies, processions and protests in line with the activist nature of the coalition.

After three years, one can very well question as to how these protests and demonstrations have made a difference. On the surface, no, because today, the picture of violence against women is as grim if not more than what it was in 1995.

Since August 1995, there have been many cases of rape and murder of women and children in police custody. According to press reports, violence against women and children has doubled in the last 5 years. On 8 March 1998, the Home Minister in a question-answer session in the Parliament admitted that from March to December 1997, 1743 women and children have been raped. Cases of acid attacks, gang rape or murder after rape have also increased. Dowry-related death and other forms of domestic violence are reported almost everyday in the newspapers. Whichever way one looks, the spectre is one of violence — and more violence.

Yet, in spite of the grim picture, there can be no denying that the protests and demonstrations in the street have resulted in a heightened awareness of crimes against women and children. The fact that women are no longer willing to accept violence silently is a message the general population gets everyday women are seen protesting or holding rallies.

Very often passers-by make encouraging remarks while

many others join the demonstration themselves. Holding demonstrations and rallies in the area where crimes are committed is one of the strategies women's organizations have adopted in order to motivate the local people to raise their voices against violence and join forces to resist it.

The struggle against violence is long and hard. It is related to patriarchy and the age old tradition of treating women as inferior and as property. It has to do with perceptions, mindset and attitudes.

However, the total lack of accountability of the law enforcement system which includes all the departments under the Home Ministry have to take a major part of the blame. It is also related to the weakens in our legal system and the existing loopholes that make it almost impossible to punish the guilty or for victims to get justice. It is when an offender knows that he/she will not be punished for committing a crime, then that crime increases. Those committing such acts have yet to get a clear message that crimes against women and children are not acceptable and that no-one is above the law.

However, in the last few years we have seen that women will no longer be silenced by intimidation, threats or social taboos. The fact that so many cases are filed is a testimony that social taboos against rape victims are breaking. The campaign by women's and human rights organisations to break taboos surrounding rape and to establish rape as a violent crime is showing signs of success.

Two decades ago rape victims would more often suffer their humiliation in silence rather than let society know. This has resulted in thousands of rapists never getting caught or punished. Today the scenario is different. More and more rape victims and their families are coming out in the open to demand justice. It is our moral and social obligation to make sure that victims get justice and offenders are punished.

One of the struggle that women have been involved in is to plug the loopholes in our le-

gal system. Under the existing system, it is almost impossible to prove rape and punish the rapist. The victim's evidence is not considered as proof and the onus of proving that she has been raped falls on her.

On April 19, one of the (vernacular) newspapers reported that in the last 2 months about 175 children and adolescent girls have become victims of violence. Police cases were filed against 350 suspects, yet only about 45 suspects were arrested. The next day, another paper reported that more than 150 cases of violence against women are pending in the courts out of which 100 are rape cases. Although chargesheets have been submitted for all these cases, but court proceedings are yet to begin.

Delays in justice add to further victimisation of the victims. Many of the accused in such cases are freed on bail. Once out, they intimidate or threaten the victims or their family members to withdraw the cases against them. Moreover, delays also result in key witnesses being intimidated and not coming out to testify.

What is required is much more positive campaigning

from all sections of the society. Those who commit or abet violence against women and children should be totally marginalised and ostracized.

We have to create such an environment that no political party or vested groups will dare to patronise those indulging in violent activities. The mastaa and fascist culture will have to be eliminated we have any vision for a safe, free and democratic society.

Our appeal on this Day of resistance is to all those who believe in human rights and the dignity of all human beings — let us be much more vocal and proactive to demonstrate our anger against all kinds of violence against women and children. Let us translate the dream into reality we all have of a safe and secure society for us and our children. Let us make a pledge to turn our society where the offenders are made to feel insecure and intimidated rather than the other way round.

For every single rape and murder, let there be hundreds and thousands of voices raised in protest. Only then will be doing justice to all those innocent victims of violence.



women. Then in order to suppress the evidence, it leads to the killing of the victims.

This has happened to Yasmeen and Seema.

Other incidences of police rape have happened but so far no justice is received. We did not see any act of punishment, except some nominal departmental actions. Then how do we expect that the members of the law enforcing agencies who have committed the violence will correct themselves? The final result of the reluctance of the authorities and their indulgence is the brutal killing of Rubel by the DB personnel. We see this as a continuation of the rape and killing of Yasmeen, Seema and all other repressions against women. Women's movement was apprehensive of this nature of the state from the beginning.

Sammilita Nari Samaj has observed the incidences of the rape and killing of Yasmeen and Seema by the police and the attitude of the administration in dealing with these cases and thereby has termed these as 'state violence'.

The case of rape of 5-year-old Tanja in the Police Control room of CMM Court is going on. Although it was a clear case of police violence, yet the entire trial is going on with a 'false' accused person, a poor man called Mora. Police authorities do not want to take any responsibility, therefore under public pressure, they only find a person to 'admit' the crime. Tanja and her father are under complete police control. The only

witness Shipon, Tanja's friend, is also under police custody.

The entire system has become so repressive that no-one will seek justice after being violated.

Because rape is one violence, but the consequences of seeking justice is even more difficult.

It has become quite obvious that the state has failed to provide minimum security to its citizens, especially to the women. The garment workers in the country are mostly women. Are they safe on their way to the factories? Are they safe within their own workplaces?

The answer is 'no.'

Yet, as they are desperate to earn an income for their livelihood, they have to go to the factories even under insecure environment. The dollars which we are earning are adding to the wealth of the owners of the factories, but not to the security of these new emerging work forces of the country. These young girls demand that they need a secure working atmosphere.

Recently, in a seminar on adolescent girls, a young girl Mahinoor said, 'We want to move freely, we want to work with boys and girls together. Can you ensure that we would not be violated when we go out?'

Mahinoor was aware of the fate of Yasmeen. Therefore, she was demanding for an atmosphere of free-movement. The adolescent girls are now seen as 'potential' mothers and therefore their reproductive health receives much attention. On the other hand, they are also the

part of the potential work force in the cheap labour industries, therefore their skill training is also given much importance. But no words on the question of

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Let's Fight against All Forms of Repression

by Farida Akhter

On this day, we do not want to mourn the deaths of Yasmeen and Seema. That is not what the departed souls of Yasmeen and Seema expect from the women's movement, rather they would like to see how the society is getting organised against the police repression.

witness Shipon, Tanja's friend, is also under police custody. The entire system has become so repressive that no-one will seek justice after being violated. Because rape is one violence, but the consequences of seeking justice is even more difficult.

It has become quite obvious that the state has failed to provide minimum security to its citizens, especially to the women. The garment workers in the country are mostly women. Are they safe on their way to the factories? Are they safe within their own workplaces?

The donors seem to be quiet on this issue. The international organisations are vocal on the issues of fatwas and the so-called fundamentalism. But very surprisingly, no concern was expressed against police repression and violence!

Sammilita Nari Samaj had to protest against the proposed SOFA (Status of Forces Agreement) because the creation of a foreign army base will invite violence against women. This has been the experience in many other US bases around the world. We are glad that the SOFA was not signed. But somehow another agreement in