

IN May of this year, a woman in Nilphamari was raped. As is often done nowadays, there was an "arbitration"; after which the rapist was set free, and the woman -- the victim -- was lashed, her head shaven, and on top of that she was forced to wear a chain of shoes around the village.

On May 7, a policeman raped a 16-year-old girl, and on May 16, an 18-year-old girl, who protested against criminals hiding out at her father's house, was gangraped and hung from a tree. On May 29, a woman was raped and killed by men who had an altercation with her husband over flying kites. On May 30, a six-year-old girl was raped by her 42-year-old Arabic teacher. On June 4, a two and a half-year-old girl was raped by a 26-year-old rickshaw-puller at a wedding ceremony in Narayanganj. On June 5, two 15- and 17-year-old boys raped a seven-year-old girl in Mymensingh. On June 15, a nine-year-old girl was raped in Kushtia but no action was taken as the rapist belonged to an "influential quarter". On July 1, a teenage girl in Demra killed herself due to the relentless harassment of a local hoodlum.

These aren't even one-fourth of the crimes against women and girls that took place in the country in the last two months. Not a week goes by during which a woman is not raped, the body of a girl not found somewhere -- anywhere, from inside a water container to a fertiliser bag. Stories of a woman cut up in pieces, falling prey to acid violence for having rejected a suitor or a housewife being strangled, beaten or burnt to death for dowry have become a staple for the dailies. Woman has been at the receiving end of so much violence and degradation in our society that she almost seems synonymous with the word 'victim'.

Rarely do we hear of judgments in these cases, because they rarely get that far. Even the most high-profile ones, after much media and even government pressure, take years to get a verdict. Others are often forgotten over time. Even after cases are lodged and, sometimes, after they reach the court, the victims and their families are threatened. In May, as soon as they were released on bail, the accused in the Simi (the art student in Narayanganj who killed herself after persistent harassment by local *mastans*) murder case threatened her

"Baba/Ma, the world is a horrible place"

Why do these horrendous crimes occur? Why did the Arabic teacher rape his student? How could the rickshaw-puller rape a two-and-a-half year old girl? Was the 40-day-old girl, whose body was found in a water container, really killed because her mother refused to give her grandfather a gold chain he wanted?

family. Last month, the family of a three-year-old rape victim was being pressurised by the family of the accused to withdraw their case.

Despite action being taken in some of the cases -- leading even to death penalties in some; despite numerous human rights and women's organisations dealing with them and the media reports being published on a daily basis, such horrendous crimes continue unabated. Why do they occur at all in the first place, we ask?

Why did the Arabic teacher rape his student? How could the rickshaw-puller rape a two-and-a-half year old girl? Was the 40-day-old girl, whose body was found in a water container, really killed because her mother refused to give her grandfather a gold chain he wanted? How can groups of people arbitrate over a rape case and later free the rapist for a fine, and punish the victim? How can people demand justice in the face of the threat and influence of the perpetrators?

And while we feel sick simply reading the newspaper reports,

we wonder how the victims and their families manage to move on.

People who are conscious of what is happening around them think twice these days about bringing another child into the world. With a girl child, the dread multiplies even more. How will they protect them? And if anything bad happens, will they get justice? How can we guarantee their safety?

As crimes spiral out of control, we simply cannot blame it on lack of education or on social divides along lines of class and race or even on sociopaths roaming around in society. Crimes are being committed everywhere and anyone can fall prey; though, for women, it is their sex and reasons linked with it, which often land them in the noose of the criminals.

We cannot ensure a safe and secure world for our loved ones anymore. What does a parent say to a child who says, "Baba/Ma, it's a horrible world. I'm scared."

The hardest part is that there is really no consolation. Because there are no guarantees -- not of protection and not of justice, we can each only try and do our bit to make things better.

Kajalie Shehreen Islam