# The Invisibles

NADIA REEDAH

Ten years old and working at a house. Nothing new about that in this country. Ten-year-olds don't have bargaining power. They don't know how to ask for more salary, better clothes, better living space, the right to go to school or quality food. Make him run errands, polish the shoes, sweep the floors and he does it without a complaint. And complaints can be dealt with easily too -- a slap on the face, a *kan mola*, or even just a piercing-enough stare to freeze the small heart inside his little body.

And that's exactly how 10-year-old Romel is treated. I first met him at my aunt's house last year -- a very enthusiastic little boy with curious eyes. My cousin, the same age as Romel, ordered him to clean her trainers before she went out to play badminton, get her badminton gear, put up the nets, turn on the lights, and wait outside the court until further orders.

A spoilt brat, this cousin of mine, that's the logical conclusion. But is she really? I remember when I was her age, growing up in a middle-class home in Mohammadpur, there was Kohinoor, Ramjani, Dilu and many others. We took it for granted that there would always be someone like that there. We took it for granted that they would not sit at the table with us and have lunch. They always got the leftover food and the quality and pattern of clothes were distinguishingly different from ours. When we went out to a relatives' house, they never accompanied us. They only went to visit their village homes once a year and school? Unheard of!

We are so used to growing up with people waiting on us hand and foot that these people, who dress and look differently from us, and are from a significantly less-privileged class than us, have been pushed into a corner and become the collective invisibles. Taken completely for granted, it would be more of a shocker if they were to be treated as equals. Although very few of us ever place ourselves in their shoes, it would instantly become obvious how important that is, in order to treat everyone with the respect every human being deserves.

One day when I was thanking my cousin's driver for dropping me off and my friend who was on the phone heard me and assumed that I was thanking a rickshawallah. "Khaise! *Rickshawallah*-reo thank you dao!" he exclaimed not knowing I was getting down from a car. And then I thought -- what an unheard of thing, why would I ever thank a *rickshawallah*? He is also part of the invisible collective, the class of people who are there doing the most physically debilitating work and making the least amount of money and getting told off with the most belittling abuse one can think of if he were to ask for five takas more on a sweltering day.

Disregard for fellow human beings who are not privileged enough to look or dress like us is an acceptable social standard. But sometimes there is more than disregard for people who work in our houses. Not only are they treated with nonchalance, they are expected to perform like robots, anything less than that is a received as contemptuous, as a threat to the socio-economic hierarchy of things. And the reply comes in the form of the worst form of a violation of basic human rights -- shouting, beating, burning with a hot iron, chopping off the hair and sometimes even throwing them off the top of buildings.

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The stories of Madhabi, Moni Mala, Swapna, Arefina, Fatema and many others have been highlighted in the newspapers many times. But has it changed the living conditions of the rest of the Madhabis and Moni Malas?