

THE BURDEN of GENDER



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You're a girl.

That, when said, is accompanied with a tone of fear, regret and guilt. Being a girl or a woman is something that can get you into trouble.

A major aspect that surrounds the insecurities associated with being a woman is: sexual harassment.

According to Ain o Shalish Kendra, 43 cases of sexual harassment (40 female and 3 male) were reported in the media from January to March, 2015. Girls and women are always living in the looming danger of being harassed. A touch here and a squeeze there. It's normal; just another day. Women and girls are repeatedly told not to make a fuss. It is common to dismiss women's fears over incidents of harassment by telling them they are overreacting, misinterpreting the situation, or that it simply is not a big deal.

The message is repeatedly sent to women that they should take precautions, rather than demand that men stop harassing and assaulting them in the first place. There is a price to pay for this status quo; women's lives take up patterns to negotiate with the threat of harassment – they alter their routes, change their plans or take a hit in their careers.

Nothing too short, nothing too tight

"When I opened my wardrobe this morning, I picked out a shirt that I really love. But then I realised I'd be spending most of the day out in public. I switched to a shalwar kameez, pinned up my orna. No overwhelming sadness. Just habit." – Sayema Syeda Hossain, 21, BRAC University

There is a constant policing that goes on when girls reach puberty. They are constantly reminded that they need to cover themselves, look the other way and never talk back to harassers. Most parents don't teach girls to confront or to ask questions; lessons regarding safety and harassment are limited to the how-tos of avoiding such situations. This allows sexual harassment to become a culturally integrated phenomenon that promotes women to be shy, submissive and highly scrutinised in terms of morality.

Always on alert

"I was walking through DCC Market with a friend. And there was a throng of men narrowing the corridor. I made a beeline through the men, who made no effort to move. I made no eye contact and walked briskly. I waited for my friend on the other side. He waited for the men to part for him, then caught up and asked 'Why are you running?' And I blinked twice before realising that this is something I do out of habit." – Auroni, 20*

Women are given the full burden of avoiding harassment by adopting a state of constant alertness in their lifestyle. Practicing such vigilance does not only involve practical changes, but emotional ones too. It can lead to a constant sense of being on alert, anticipating danger and feeling unsafe. The regularity of these incidents affects their behaviour and confidence in public spaces.

We have become used to the idea that it is 'normal' for women to not travel after dark or call when they get home safely. This helps in creating a norm: that harassment and assault are natural and even expected parts of life, rather than deliberate (criminal) acts.

Negotiating everyday

"My parents moved back to Dhaka from

Sydney when I was in class 5; my Bubu had finished high school by then. Even in Australia, in a relatively safe neighbourhood, she led a very sheltered life. I don't remember her going out with friends; our parents were quite strict. Even when she started university, the regulations remained strict. She didn't even own a cell phone until her second semester in university. I think it eventually caused



Bubu to become isolated. On the other hand, I had much more freedom in Dhaka. I've had a cell phone since class 9; I went to sleepovers and stayed out till 11pm – parents never worried as long as I called them up once. Looking back, Bubu missed out on a lot of opportunities, mainly her chance to study in Australia. All of this because she is a girl and parents

would not let her out in the world alone." – Yaameen Al-Muttaqui, 20, University of Melbourne

The priority of protection dominates how parents decide the lifestyle of their girls from the moment they step into puberty. The kinds of friends you make, who you talk to on the internet, what you wear and where you go, etc. Boundaries are important, but we make boundaries necessary for a girl and negotiable for a boy. There is a distinct discrimination in how parents and schools determine the lifestyles of their children – it is unmistakably different if you are a girl. Being a woman becomes a constant series of negotiations.



Frantic phone calls, questions and ultimatums become daily routine if one tries to push the boundaries that protect them to achieve something that empowers them.

Trying to live with being harassed

"My hujur molested me when I was 10. He used to kiss me while his hands played around. Of course I didn't know what kissing was, but I could feel this wasn't right. It was winter and he had the smell of petroleum jelly. I remember trying to wash that off. Even now that smell haunts me, constantly reminding me of him. I tried to get

over this. I know this may sound irrational but for a long time, I thought it was my fault that I was molested. It took me 11 years to share this with anyone." – Ananya, 21*

Surviving incidences of sexual harassment leave behind long-term impacts on women and girls. The stigma that surrounds it makes it hard and in some cases impossible for the victim to even acknowledge that incident. In most cases, whether the harassment occurs on the streets or at home, women face a lack of support system that is required to overcome the anger, shame or helplessness. Experiences like this are not simply unpleasant during the time they occur but often become crucial in forming a

woman's perspective for years to come, policing their behaviour.

Incidents of sexual harassment and how they affect women are all around us and in most cases the women are made to feel as if the fault is theirs. They weren't dressed 'modestly', they wore too much makeup, etc.

It is important to realise that a woman's honour is not robbed when she is sexually assaulted. Her honour is not damaged, her safety is. Until we stop associating sexual harassment with shame and stigma, it will remain a tool that asserts control over our lives and the way we live.

*Names have been changed to protect privacy.