



PHOTO: STAR

WHY CAN'T WE STOP THE STALKING?

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Unwanted attention is something that a woman has had to experience at some point of time in their lives. It's not something new and it doesn't look like this tendency to pursue someone incessantly, abusing them with words or behaviour, and 'claiming' them for their own will disappear from our civilisation anytime soon. When girls are told by their elders and the society in general that boys will be boys, and they should do everything in their power to avoid their advances, the general reaction is to submit to these demands, to 'cover up', and not be out alone after a 'respectable time'. But what does a girl/woman do when the stalker attacks her in the middle of the day, in the midst of thousands of people, within an environment that she considers safe and secure?

Khadiza Akter Nargis, was attacked by her stalker Badrul in broad daylight at MC College in Sylhet while the other students watched first in disbelief, and then in apparent helplessness as she dropped to the ground where the deranged man continued to attack her. Fortunately, Khadiza is alive and though her path to recovery is slow, it is a miracle that she was able to survive such a vicious attack on her life. But fourteen-year-old Suraiya Akhter Risha was not as fortunate. Three days after being brutally stabbed by her stalker, who worked at a tailoring shop which she visited, for refusing his 'romantic' overtures, Suraiya passed away.

Ain O Shalish Kendra (ASK) states that in 2015, 89 girls and women were attacked by their stalkers for refusing their advances while 10 committed suicide due to sexual harassment and 6 were killed by their stalkers. In the first six months of 2016, at least 6 people were killed for protesting sexual harassment while 57 others were injured, and 3 girls committed suicide while 4 others stopped going to school. Data from Bangladesh Shishu Adhikar Forum (BSAF), on the other hand, states that in 2016, at least 31 reported being harassed while 16 reported being sexually harassed by their stalkers for refusing their advances. It further states that 22 girls were sexually assaulted by their stalkers, which often included their male teachers. These are not just statistics; these are only the number of girls whose torture in the hands of their 'admirers' came into the light. There are thousand of others who are scared to report when someone harasses them in fear of retribution to them or their family.

In January 2011, the High Court declared stalking of girls and women illegal and directed the government to consider the offence as sexual harassment. According to newspaper reports this ruling came amid growing incidents of stalking that led many victims to commit suicide. According to the Act, the maximum sentence for sexual harassment is ten years of imprisonment while the minimum is three years. Needless to say, nothing much has changed in the five years since the ruling.

Nur Khan Liton, Acting Executive Director of Ain O Salish Kendro claims that no visible efforts have made by law enforcers to prevent incidents of stalking. "In most police stations, they do not have a cell to address sexual harassment. Nothing much is done in this regard, except for the occasional drives against sexual harassment," states Khan.

In fact, many girls are wary of reporting sexual harassment because of the harassment they face in the hands of the police. Thirteen-year-old Amina, a house help, says that as she takes evening classes after completing her work, arranged by a local NGO in her neigh-

bourhood, it's often a little late by the time she reaches home. She is often confronted by catcallers on her way home, but she says she keeps her head down, wraps her scarf tightly around her head and body, and tries to ignore the verbal abuse. However, one day, one of the catcallers followed her home, all the while telling her that he loved her and would keep her happy if she married him. When this happened more than thrice, she fearfully spoke to one of the female NGO workers who taught her in the school. She immediately took Amina to the police station to file a report but maybe not that shockingly, the police were not that cooperative. They asked awkward questions, and even advised Amina to not take the route back home while promising the NGO worker that they would

police station across the country to monitor and deal with stalking cases. The cell is required to submit monthly reports to respective superintendents of police, or commissioners of police, who will discuss those at the meetings of District Development Committees under the deputy commissioners to take necessary actions, according to the court directive. Again, most, if not all, of these directives remain unfulfilled by the concerned authorities. "According to the HC directive, there should be a committee in every educational institute to deal with sexual harassment cases. Unfortunately, most schools, colleges and universities do not have such committees. And even where there are such committees, they are not effective or the rules are not properly enforced," says Nur

the pictures on the Internet if she did not return her advances or talk about it to anyone else. Moreover, the case statement states that he harassed two other female students in his office and house on two separate dates.

It's the culture of impunity that allows perpetrators to get away with crimes such as sexual harassment, says Nur Khan Liton. Girls are usually scared to report the crimes in fear that their lives or that of their family members might be danger in case their stalkers get to know of their action, and more often than not, their fears are not unfounded. In one case out of several, stalkers killed the mother of a girl student when she protested the harassment they were forcing upon her daughter. Many times, male family members or teachers are

ijjat is dictated by men. If women work out of home, men generally think that their control over women will be diminished. They thus try to restrict them by imposing this vague concept of *ijjat* on them.

We also have to remember that in many cases, stalkers don't act alone; they have a group of friends who have a similarly deranged mind, and are not afraid of 'supporting' their friend in getting the woman he has targeted. This obviously comes from the mindset that women are the rightful property of men, and don't have any business to deny their romantic overtures. You either accept the proposal or prepare to face the consequences. For most men, it is as simple as that. And our film media has a strong role to play in perpetuating this myth of 'no means yes'. You will find countless movies where the 'hero' stalks and harasses the heroine until she finally realises that she has fallen in love with him and accepts his proposal.

"Objectification of women and girls must stop. It perpetuates the culture of sexual harassment in the society," says Dr. Syed Md. Saikh Imtiaz. "In our media, advertisements and movies, you will find gross examples of objectification of women and girls."

It is of utmost importance to define stalking as what it is: sexual harassment. The right lexicon might not result in immediate change, but it definitely pushes people to deem this disgraceful crime as something more vicious than the 'irrational act of a fool in love.' Words can make a difference and that's why in the 2011 directive, the High Court directed the government to consider the offence of stalking as sexual harassment. "It is of utmost importance that we stop using the word 'stalking' to describe such cases. It should be called sexual harassment. Even the HC declared stalking of girls and women illegal, and directed the government to consider the offence as sexual harassment," says Dr. Imtiaz.

Despite saying it time and again, we once again want to reiterate our appeal. If we continue to tell our girls that you don't deserve to study, go out, have a life because someone might attack you, or harass you, what we are essentially doing is turning them into fearful, timid beings who are scared to even attempt to reach their full potential. Right now, the call is to teach our boys how to be human beings before being 'men'. As men are still the sole bearers of law and order in our society, they should first change their mindset and attitude of thinking of women as their property under some kind of perverse law. It's only then that girls like Risha and Khadiza can hope to get some justice.

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'try their best' to apprehend the criminal. "I was even more shaken after my encounter with the police," says Amina. "I told apu (the NGO worker) that I didn't want to file any case, and would do everything in my power to avoid the guy." She eventually quit her classes, which allowed her to come back home before sunset. "I've always wanted to have an education but at this point, nothing is bigger than my life," she says, tears welling up in her eyes.

According to the 2011 HC ruling, there should be a provision for specialised doctors who can address the mental trauma of the victims of sexual harassment, and the status of the doctors should be mentioned in the investigation report. It also ordered the government to set up separate cells at every

Khan Liton.

And what do you do when a teacher, responsible to ensure the safety of all their students, harasses his female students, often with impunity? In May 2016, Mahfuzur Rashid Ferdous, a teacher of Ahsanullah University of Science and Technology, was arrested for sexually harassing several of his female students. Initially, the university seemed unwilling to take any step against the teacher but after students staged demonstrations on campus against the teacher, alleging that he has a long record of sexually harassing female students, they were forced to suspend him on April 30. According to the charge sheet, Ferdous sexually harassed a first year student of EEE in his flat, and captured indecent pictures of her and threatened to release

brutally, and sometimes fatally, attacked when they raise their voice against this disgraceful crime. "The culture of impunity is terribly affecting people's willingness to report such cases. Our legal system is not very conducive in addressing these issues. We do not have an effective witness protection law, and so in many cases we do not find witnesses for such cases," says Liton.

It's also the society's perception of women that needs to be changed if we seek to address the issue of sexual harassment and stop this sense of impunity, says Dr. Syed Md. Saikh Imtiaz, Chairman of the Department of Women and Gender Studies, University of Dhaka. "In our society, there is an overwhelming presence of the concept of *ijjat* (honour), and the terms of maintaining one's