



UNIVERSAL CHILDREN'S DAY

THE LESS TALKED ABOUT ABUSE OF CHILDREN

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The spike in sexual assault against children as young as five years old is sickening, but the increasing reach of the media is at least ensuring that these crimes are brought to light. There is however, another kind of abuse many children are subject to that is not sexual abuse but has profound effects in a child's physical and mental wellbeing. It is the physical and verbal abuse inflicted on children in the name of discipline in school and at home. Unfortunately, though lately the term corporal punishment is being discussed (that too after some horrific incidents were exposed in the media) and there is a law in our country against it, children continue to be physically and mentally tortured and the consequences can be disastrous.

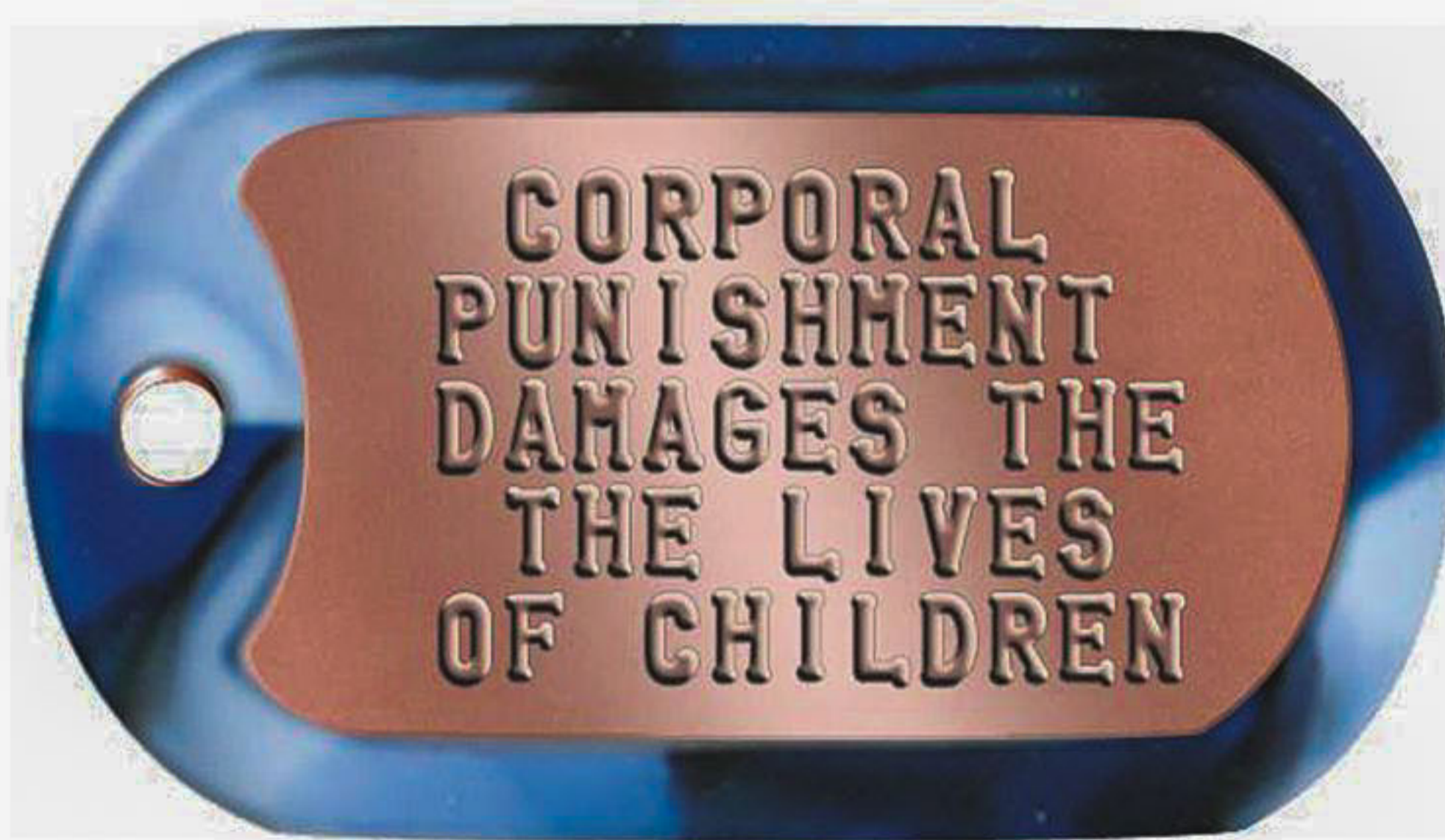
The NSPCC (National Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children), UK defines child abuse as any action that causes significant harm to a child, be it physical, sexual, or emotional. These terms bring to mind cases of molestation and rape, or torture caused by outsiders. Seldom do we think of the harsh behaviour inflicted by family members and teachers, whereas these are the things children are least able to revolt against.

Our culture has a deep-rooted tradition of punishing children harshly. Older generations especially took pride in disciplining their children through caning, flogging and other forms of physical punishment that would supposedly make disciplined, obedient human beings out of errant, rebellious children. Teachers practiced similar methods of corporal punishment in classrooms, the most common of which were slapping students' palms with rulers and squeezing their fingers

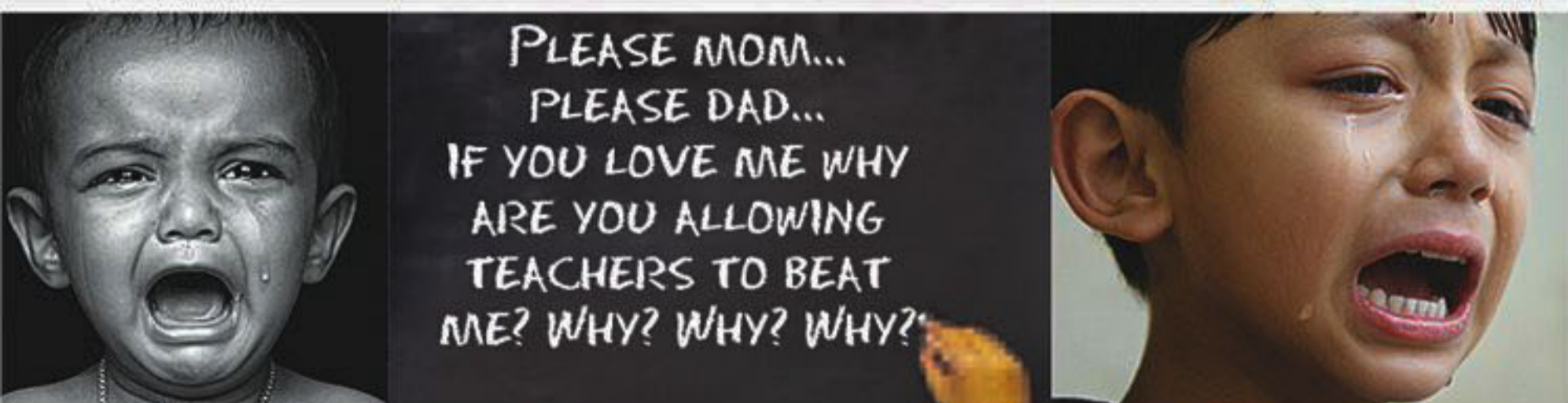
He may drop out of school. As parents and the society continue to expect more and more from him while he grows up, the pressure will only increase. In extreme cases, he may even develop obesity, diabetes, asthma, and lung and cardiovascular disease.

Perhaps as a result of such consequences, corporal punishment in schools was made illegal in Bangladesh in 2011 by the High Court, as a result of the litigation by the Bangladesh Legal Aid and Services Trust and Ain o Salish Kendro. But loopholes still exist.

According to Article 89 of the Penal Code 1860, "Nothing which is done in good faith for the benefit of a person under twelve years of age, or of unsound mind by or by consent, either express or implied, of the guardian or other person having lawful charge of that person, is an offence by reason of any harm which it may cause..." (<http://www.endcorporalpunishment.org>).



COURTESY: SIR FRANK PETERS



PLEASE MOM...
 PLEASE DAD...
 IF YOU LOVE ME WHY
 ARE YOU ALLOWING
 TEACHERS TO BEAT
 ME? WHY? WHY? WHY?

together with pens held between them. We have read news reports of young students in schools and madrasas being chained, hung upside down, their head shaved and their bodies bruised with repeated beatings. It is horrifying to imagine kids subjected to this kind of pain, and yet many parents overlooked or worse, encouraged schools to uphold such barbaric disciplining methods. Many still do.

A factsheet posted on the Child Welfare Information Gateway website discusses the long-term consequences of child abuse and neglect. Imagine a child that is shaken, slapped, whipped or beaten by a parent or teacher, especially at a young age. The force may impair certain parts of the child's brain from developing. Once he starts to grow up, he may fail to develop cognitive and language abilities; he may face difficulty in coping with studies; and suffer from isolation, anxiety, low self-esteem, hyper-vigilance and extremely impulsive behaviour. He may find it difficult to trust people and build lasting relationships.

The 2011 Supreme Court ruling makes this applicable only to necessary medical interventions, but it doesn't mention strict rulings against corporal punishments at home, thus giving a certain justification for violence. This, in addition to loopholes in the Penal Code, Domestic Violence Act 2010 and the repealed Children Act 2013, often serves as a defence against corporal punishment. Article 70 of the Children Act 2013 prohibits abuse, torture or negligence of any child. Breach of the law involves a fine of Tk 1 lakh or up to five years in jail for the convicted. And yet, 82.3 percent of children aged 1-14 experienced some form of violent punishment within one month of a survey conducted in 2013 by the Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics and UNICEF. Of them, 65.9 percent faced physical punishment and 74.4 percent were subject to psychological aggression. The latter figure highlights an even more understated issue.

"I had a patient whose parents and siblings used to tell her she was collected from a dustbin because she was overweight and a bit

different. She is a 38-year-old woman who suffered from paranoia about her husband having an affair for a long time," says Shilpi Rahman, a mental health counsellor currently based in Qatar. Shilpi's patient suffered from anxiety and depression for years. She wasn't in good terms with her parents because she thought they didn't love her, which translated into a negative relationship with her in-laws as well. As a result of mental abuse in her childhood, this woman believed that the world didn't want her for a large part of her adult life.

Shilpi elaborates on the various forms of psychological abuse, such as taunting, belittling and public humiliation, that leave scars on children's psyches. One of the most pressing examples, but one we seldom think of as harmful, is comparison. Parents often compare their child to others who are better at studies or sports, or are prettier, skinnier, have fairer complexions. It is even worse when the comparison is made between siblings. The child at the receiving end develops severe self-esteem issues, which is worsened by the guilt of feeling jealous of his/her own sibling. It eventually breeds resentment, creating a rift in the family that may stay back for years.

"I went through major weight gain during my teens. My mother is someone who cannot stand fat people, so she had this habit of berating my appearance," shares a student of a private university in Dhaka. "It's come to a point where I know I'm never going to be able

to see myself in a different light."

Meanwhile, students who are insulted or mistreated by teachers develop distaste for education. Nehrin Radeyha Rafique, a student of IBA at Dhaka University, recalls the constant humiliation she faced in school. "We had teachers who used to question our upbringing and family backgrounds on many occasions, especially if we made mistakes. We tried to resist through written complaints, and even met with the class teacher. If anything, things got worse for us. We were scared and angry because a group of abusive individuals were tarnishing 12 years of our memories, that too, in the name of education and discipline," recalls Nehrin.

These are the practices that create bullies. Children are impressionable, and they are influenced most strongly by their families and mentors. The child who is belittled for being overweight, dark in complexion or mediocre in studies or sports has an ingrained notion that anyone who doesn't possess those qualities deserves to be treated badly. She then projects those beliefs onto her peers and social circles, glorifying the traits of superiority and taking pride in intimidating others. Unable to fight back against the ill treatment subjected to her by close ones and authority figures, she is likely to channel her angst onto others who can't fight back against her. It's a vicious cycle.

In more extreme cases, according to the Child Welfare Information Gateway, these victims of psychological abuse may succumb

to substance abuse, personality disorders, delinquency, sexual risk-taking (which increases the risk of contracting sexually transmitted diseases) and criminal behaviour.

When asked about why such abusive practices still exist despite the recurrent media attention, counsellor Shilpi Rahman and student Nehrin Radeyha addressed the two sides involved - that of adults and children. Nehrin mentions generation gap as one of the key issues. She says, "They fail to understand that we face issues far different from what they faced, and it's frustrating. I believe abuse comes from unrealistic expectations, among other things. Mental abuse is far more scarring than physical abuse."

Interestingly, Shilpi addresses the same factors. "Parents don't understand the damage they have on children's lives. They think that they'll grow up and forget. They don't," states Shilpi firmly. "Social language needs to change. We need to stop thinking of ourselves as progressive parents only so long as our children fulfil certain specific requirements. Adults need to curb their unreal expectations from children, and replace notions of failure and mistake with more positive ideas of resilience and optimism."

These issues run far deeper and darker than we can imagine. It's all too easy to blame a child for being anxious, for being a bully, or for being a bad student; easier still to cast blame on adults for misconduct. As we try to deal with the horrors of sexual assault and murder that seem to have gripped our society more strongly of late, it is important that we stop to think of the factors that caused such tragedies. The government, media, educational institutions and most importantly families must work hand in hand to address and tackle these hidden facets of child abuse. Sir Frank Peters, a royal goodwill ambassador and a lifelong champion for eliminating corporal punishment in Bangladesh says, "I believe involving the police, criminal charges, convictions, jailing and so on, should be a last resort. The Education Department that holds the top of the pyramid position and is ultimately responsible for the behaviour of its employees ought to instigate a programme of self-regulation within each school at first before the heavy hammers are used."

The writer is a student of English and Economics at NSU, and an intern at the Editorial department, The Daily Star.