

Editor and Publisher
(The Daily Star)
Mahfuz Anam

Editor (Star Weekend)
Sushmita S Preetha

Staff Writers
Md Shahnawaz Khan
Chandan
Fayeka Zabeen Siddiqua
Naziba Basher
Apurba Jahangir
Nilima Jahan

Staff Photographer
Kazi Tahsin Agaz Apurbo

Graphics & Illustrations
Manan Morshed

Make-up
Md Saiful Islam

Production
Shamim Chowdhury

Published by the Editor from
Transcraft Ltd, 229, Tejgaon
Industrial Area, Dhaka on
behalf of Mediaworld Ltd., 52
Motijheel C.A., Dhaka-1000.

MAILBOX

thestarmagazine@gmail.com



PHOTO: PAHN CHAKMA

The Plight of the Indigenous People

During my time at university, one of my friends, from an indigenous community, and I used to share a dorm room. He was very well-mannered and I spent a lot of time with him, always curious to learn about his culture. He told me many stories about their tough life in the hill tracts. He used to sing indigenous songs in which I could only recognise the word 'Rangamati', which was once their capital districts before the construction of the Kaptai hydro-electric facility that engulfed a large part of the district. Seeing the snapshot of Rangamati Kaptai Lake by Pahn Chakma, published in Star Weekend Magazine on 10th March 2017, I was reminded of my friend and the songs he used to sing in honour of their glorious past. The Kaptai Lake may look tranquil, but the lives of the indigenous people are not. However, I would like to thank Pahn Chakma for this outstanding photo which took me back to the older days when I used to listen to the untold stories of the indigenous people and dreamed of rescuing them from their hardships.

Md Azam Khan
Laxmipur, Chittagong

Do You Recognise the Patriarchy?

I was grieving when I was reading the article titled 'Do you recognise the patriarchy' in the *Star Weekend's* issue of March 03, 2017. However, after reading this article, I felt like it is the reflection of my life, it is my own story that has been told in this article. It is the story of all the women of the world who have to constantly fight with the patriarchal system, till the very end of their lives. On the other hand, I also enjoyed the article because, through this article, the writer has effectively questioned the patriarchal construct of our society with a very strong but satirical tone.

Nasrin Akhter
Ahmednagar
Dhaka

After the Accident

The article titled "After the Accident" published last week (March 10, 2017) was quite an informative and insightful piece that focused on how we should deal with deadly road accidents. With the story of Oshim, as the article read, there comes a beam of hope as some organisations, all by themselves, have come forward to help victims of road accidents get quick first aid, and subsequently be taken to nearby hospitals, thereby, saving lives. The number of road accident fatalities published by WHO is really shocking. It is high time the government took the initiative to patronise these NGOs working for road-crash victims. A hotline especially dedicated to these victims, as most of the developed countries already have, can be one of the solutions to this ever intensifying crisis.

Samiul Raijul
North South University, Dhaka



PHOTO COURTESY: TRAUMALINK

The opinions expressed in these letters do not necessarily represent the views of the *Star Weekend*.

| GENDER |

Recently, the news of a Dhaka University (DU) teacher's suspension – following claims from some of his Masters students that he showed "obscene materials" in his Gender and Development class – made the rounds on social media. The DU authorities temporarily suspended Development Studies Professor Dr Md Reazul Haque over the allegation. The slides that stirred this debate depict illustrations and pictures which critique gender-insensitive behaviour and public policies.

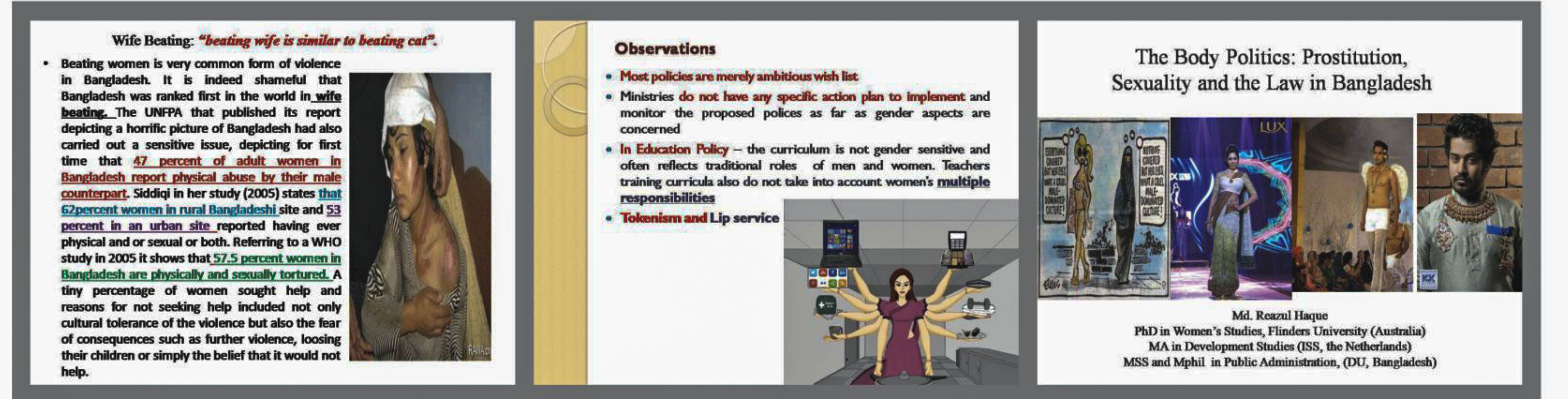
This incident naturally raised important questions: What exactly was the objectionable content of the course? How do we even define obscenity in study materials, particularly in disciplines like Gender and Development Studies?

The allegation that the materials taught in Dr Haque's class were "obscene" reveals a deep-rooted anxiety and discomfort to discuss issues related to gender and sexuality. Sexuality, since long, has been deemed as something to be discussed in hushed voices, behind closed doors – something too inappropriate, to

Dr Haque shares his confusion regarding his students' reactions. "Many women are physically and sexually harassed at home - sure, we all know that. But when I show pictures that show bruises on the exposed parts of the female body – that suddenly becomes obscenity?" questions Dr Haque. "If I talk about rape culture or body politics of the Hijra community in modern Asia in my classroom, how can it be considered

WHO DEFINES OBSCENITY?

FAYEKA ZABEEN SIDDIQUA



Slides taken from Dr Reazul Haque's presentation.

be discussed openly in a class. Even if it's in a room full of adults who should be able to confront these issues in a critical and constructive manner.

"Teaching gender and development studies will inevitably require the instructors to bring up 'sensitive' topics, ranging from sexual orientation to transgender movements, from the history of sexual norms to queer theory and gender identity and gender biases," says Dr Sadeka Halim, Professor, Department of Sociology, Dhaka University, and former information commissioner. "The more I teach gender studies in classrooms, the more I realise that there is still a tremendous amount of taboo around sexuality and the female body."

What surprised Dr Haque is that that none of the 15 students raised any objections during the classes about the audiovisuals and overall course material. In fact, throughout his career, while teaching subjects like gender and development, social inclusion or feminist research methodologies, he was required to bring up issues that we generally don't talk about in public. In 2015, he published his book, *Voices from the Edge: Justice, Agency and the Plight of Floating Sex Workers in Dhaka, Bangladesh*, which was applauded by gender experts in the country.

The allegation that the materials taught in Dr Haque's class were "obscene" reveals a deep-rooted anxiety and discomfort to discuss issues related to gender and sexuality.



vulgar? If my fellow professor from Population Science chooses his PhD thesis on 'Homosexuality, HIV and Stigma', would we consider that to be inappropriate and obscene as well?"


If we consider these issues "obscene", public discussions on issues like sexuality, rape, and reproductive health will continue to be vague and deceptive. And what constitutes obscene, anyway, and according to whom? As Mahmudul H Sumon, Associate Professor, Department of Anthropology, Jahangirnagar University, argues, "The question of obscenity is a

time to place gender at the centre of our education agenda."

Labelling course content as "obscene" and "vulgar" will hinder the creation of an inclusive environment in the classrooms and discourage free thinking, believes Dr Halim. "After Dr Haque's incident, other faculty teaching similar subjects will be in a persistent fear of being watched and judged for what they teach in the classrooms," she adds.

Unfortunately, starting from a young age in school we are taught to shy away from topics that society considers to be "sensitive" and "controversial" no matter how important they may be. Thus, our natural reaction is to be "offended" when we are confronted with such issues. It is common for teachers to approach sexuality and reproductive health from a superficial standpoint, without recognising the importance of conducting discussions with students in a professional and educational manner. Incidents like the suspension of the university teacher will thereby surely further weaken the confidence of facilitators to talk about these issues that are crucial to understanding society, people and our identities. ■





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