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PHOTO: PAHN CHAKMA

The sun doesn't care if you are made of flesh or stone.  
— Joaquin Lowe, *Bullet Catcher*

**SNAPSHOT**

**WOMEN'S RIGHTS**

This could have been a landmark case. This could have - once and for all - proved that sexual harassment on the street is something that needs to be dealt with the force of law.

Two years down the line, it is simply a mockery of women's rights.

The law enforcers have unquestionable evidence - security footage. Many of the feeds are not that hazy either - it is quite easy to make out how several organised bands of men went about attacking merrymaking women in the streets. Many of the faces are clear enough to warrant recognition.

Out of the many jeering faces caught on security footage, however, only one has been brought to book. One sole person, going by the name of Mohammed Kamal Hossain, and a vegetable vendor by profession, was prosecuted, according to the chargesheet submitted to the court. And even his role - whether he was actually involved or not - has been questioned.

"Right after the incident happened, I personally sat down with the detective branch of the police for about four or five hours to point out the men violating the women," said Liton Nandi, the general secretary of Bangladesh Students' Union, "but they could not find out their names."

A quick recap: On the evening of April 14, several groups of men targeted women in the TSC intersection in an organised manner, resulting in a horrifying display of public sexual violence that lasted over an hour. The incident was similar to what happened in Germany and Bangalore during the New Year's eves of 2016 and 2017 respectively.

Nandi was present during the incident and helped several women get to safety. He broke his arm in the process, as he tried to fight off the crowds. He was afterwards the loudest voice advocating for safe streets for women, and punishment for those who participated in the incident.

"What probably made it harder to recognise the criminals is the fact that none of them were students of Dhaka University," states Nandi. "Had they been students, someone somewhere would've recognised them."

Hossain was not even seen molesting girls in the video. "He was simply shown hanging about the scene for about an hour or so," he adds. He however could not say for certain whether Kamal Hossain was a bystander.

"When questioned, he initially said

**WHAT COULD HAVE BEEN A LANDMARK CASE**

ZYMA ISLAM



PHOTO: STAR FILE

that he had lost his wife and was looking for her," says Nandi, "and from the footage it felt like he was wandering about aimlessly." Kamal's wife too corroborated his statement.

On January 31, 2016 a media report by *The Daily Star* quoted the police as saying that Kamal had refused to give a confession. The news report claimed that while Kamal had initially confessed to his crimes under interrogation, he later changed his mind when brought to court. There could be two interpretations of this. The first one is that since he was seen roaming around with the crowd molesting the girls, he knew one or multiple insiders unquestionably. The other interpretation is that Kamal truly was looking for his wife and had given his first confession under duress - when his remand ended, he no longer had to face interrogation and thus refused to confess to a crime he may not have been involved in.

The commitment of the investigators comes further under question because the case was made to go through a reinvestigation by the court. In December of 2015, the police submitted a charge sheet to the court failing to identify any of the perpetrators and naming no one. Public prosecutor

Mahmuda Akhter submitted a petition suggesting that the case be reinvestigated and handed over to the Police Bureau of Investigation. Following her petition, Kamal was caught.

She however claims that this did not reflect on the police, but was simply precautionary.

"It was routine really - we do this with many important cases," she said. When asked whether she was satisfied with the results of the second investigation, she said that having even one arrestee to put on the docks could make or break the case. "We can interrogate him and go forward from there," she said.

The fact that none of the victims came forward to give their statements made it that much harder for advocates and investigators alike. I asked Liton Nandi whether he personally came across such victims or whether anyone approached him.

No, he said. The reason however has more to do with whether enough effort was put to create a conducive climate for them to come forward and provide witness.

"It is very difficult for a survivor of sexual violence to come forth and give a statement in this country," said Nandi. "She will feel violated a hundred times

throughout the process of investigation and the interrogation in court. People will question what clothes she was wearing and try to relate that with the violence she faced."

He explained how the victim could have had to relive the trauma in court. "On that evening my men and I came across a man and a woman lying on the ground. Her sari and blouse was torn off her. I took off my panjabi and threw it on top of her."

The last time she was seen by Nandi was when he inspected the security footage of the women's dormitory Rokeya Hall, where she had gone to seek refuge in the guest-room.

The Pro-Vice Chancellor of Dhaka University, Professor Nasrin Ahmed, has a more simplistic explanation as to why none of the victims came forth. "I believe that none of the victims were from Dhaka University - they were all outsiders," she said, "because we sent out notifications to all the women's hostels asking affected students to approach us, and put out media ads as well." Professor Ahmed was heading a committee investigating the role of the university right after the incident happened.

That there is insufficient integrity in the commitment to provide safe public spaces for women is also seen in the police's decision to ban gatherings at TSC in the evening during last year's Pahela Baishakh celebrations.

"To keep women safe, they are making an area off-limits to the crowd instead of tackling the real problem," said Nandi, who believes that this is a very conservative stance to take.

"I told the Dhaka Metropolitan Police commissioner that doing this would not solve the issue," adds Nandi. And what did the DMP commissioner say?

"He said that changing the mentality is a larger process that is the responsibility of the state - their job is to keep law and order and they are simply finding the most effective way of doing that," states Nandi, resignedly. He believes that the battle is not over yet.

A 2014 study by Actionaid interviewed 800 women and girls from the urban areas in Bangladesh and found that 88 percent have gone through sexual harassment in public places. In a country where the unacceptable is ordinary, in a way, this case would have set an example in criminalising the violence that women face every day. Now it seems like the authorities are simply throwing us crumbs, while eating the cake themselves. ■

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**Women in Leadership**

I would like to thank *Star Weekend* for publishing the article titled "Women in Leadership: For the Women, By the Women" which featured how women struggle to reach leadership positions overcoming hundreds of obstacles of a patriarchal society. Currently the government has emphasised ensuring women's representation in the local government levels, such as union councils and municipalities. I would like to recommend *Star Weekend* to feature some of these women leaders who have to fulfill their political mandate in a highly corrupt and male-dominated political environment. I wonder what strategies they apply to survive in such hostile environment at the local level.

Abu Sayed  
Begum Rokayea University, Rangpur



PHOTO: STAR FILE

**Mashrafe, Our Pride!**

Mashrafe Bin Mortaza is not only a cricket player but also a hero, a fighter and an ideal leader. His captaincy has a magical power through which he has taken Bangladesh to a new level in the world of cricket. His sudden retirement from International T20 has shocked me to the core. In the hearts of cricket fans of Bangladesh, Mashrafe has secured a place of love and respect. His encouraging performance despite his indescribable physical ordeal and his stirring patriotic words made him an icon of Bangladeshi youth. He showed us how to defeat misfortune through hard work and determination. He is not only the captain of Bangladesh Cricket Team, he is also our pride. I hope Mashrafe will not bend under any negative influence and reconsider his untimely decision of leaving T20 cricket.

Sayek Ahmed Sajib  
Shaaronkhola, Bagerhat

**In Search of Home**

I used to wonder why no one writes about the unique environment of the hostels where students from different socio-economic background stay and suffer together just to earn an educational qualification. Whether it is a private hostel or a hostel in a public university, the survival skill the students learn there is no less significant than the knowledge they acquire in the classrooms. However, these skills come



PHOTO: ZYMA ISLAM

at a price. Due to lack of a friendly and comfortable environment in these hostels, many students suffer in their academic lives. I would like to thank *Star Weekend* for highlighting these issues in the article titled "In Search of Home" published on March 31, 2017. As a student staying in hostel from the very beginning of my university life, I feel that students' academic performance depend a lot on the quality of the institution's residential facility. If a student can be provided with comfortable room and ensured quality food supply, I believe that the student will be more attentive to his/her study and be more innovative in applying the knowledge that they acquire in their classrooms.

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