

# SSC SUICIDES THE HUMAN COST OF AN EDUCATION

MALIHA KHAN

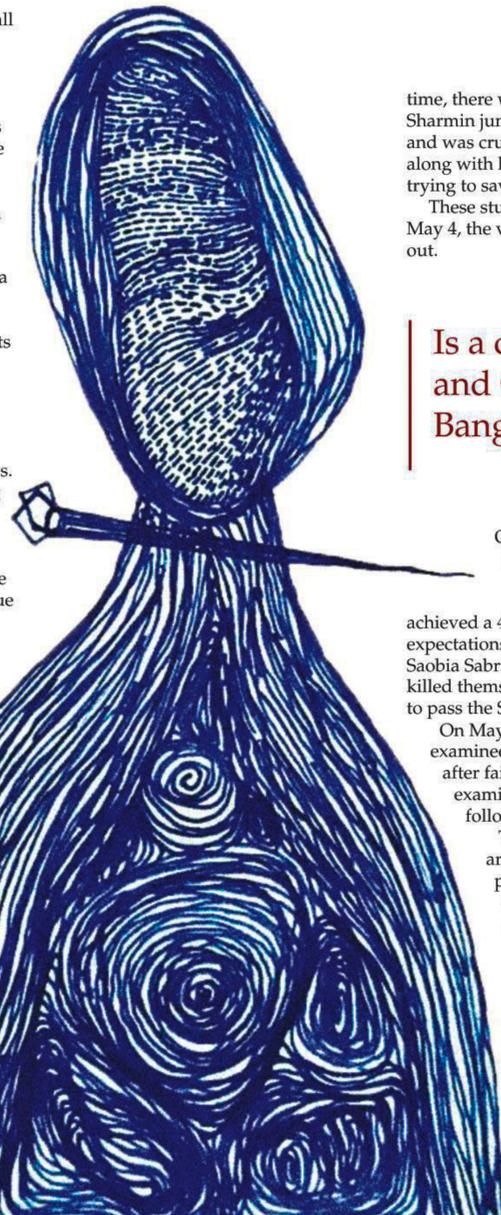


ILLUSTRATION: KAZI TAHSIN AGAZ APURBO

Sanjida Islam Nova, first girl of her class at Uttara's Bangamata Sheikh Fazilatunnessa Government High School, killed herself on May 8, 2017. Family members found her body early in the morning. Just the night before, she had stayed up late chatting with her family.

Nova (as she was called by her family) was a talented student and had hopes of joining the air force or army, according to her paternal uncle, Nasir Uddin. She achieved a 4.73 GPA but had hoped for a GPA-5 in her SSC examinations. Her uncle consoled her saying, "Not getting a GPA-5 is not a problem. You can make up for it in your HSC exams. You can still get admitted to universities with a minimum GPA of 3.5."

Nova's family is in shock and grief because they do not understand why she suddenly took her own life. Nasir insists that Nova's parents did not pressure her to achieve a Golden A+ (scoring 80+ in every subject) or GPA-5 (A+ or an overall average of 80+). "We are an educated family, we are not like that," he says, close to tears.

Going by this account, Nova had achieved quite well in her examinations and, seemingly, had family support. She had also not apparently displayed warning signs of suicide such as loss of interest in activities or withdrawal from friends and family. She did, however, experience what many perceive as a 'failure' in their education—not getting a GPA-5 in the SSC exams.

Is a culture of achieving GPA-5 and Golden A+ driving Bangladeshi students to suicide? The recent spate of student suicides in the week immediately following SSC results being published seems to suggest so. It is no longer enough to pass in these examinations; students aim for the best possible grades. Failing to reach this is, for an increasing number of students, making life not worth living.

Since May 4 when the SSC, Dakhil, and vocational examination results were published, at least 13 cases of suicide due to failure to pass and grade dissatisfaction have been reported. Seven of the deaths occurred on the very day results were published. The victims are all 16 to 17 years old.

In Shariatpur, Shamim killed himself after failing to pass 2 subjects (mathematics and accounting). Hridoy Biswas and Arifa Begum in Magura, and Dakhil examinee Pori Akter in Pirojpur, all took their lives after failing to pass the exams. In Chittagong, Md Soharab Tasfique took his life unsatisfied with having obtained a 3.77 GPA, as did Dakhil examinee Shamim Mandal in Gaibandha.

In Jamalpur, Sharmin Akhter committed suicide after failing to pass in the SSC exams. But this

time, there was also collateral damage. Sharmin jumped down in the train tracks and was crushed by an incoming train, along with her pregnant aunt, who was trying to save her.

These students all took their lives on May 4, the very day their results came out.

## Is a culture of achieving GPA-5 and Golden A+ driving Bangladeshi students to suicide?

On the day after results were published (May 5), NM Dipu killed himself in Jatrabari having learnt that he achieved a 4.95 GPA, against his expectations of a GPA-5. Jesy Akter, Saobia Sabrina and Tahmina Akter in Feni killed themselves, frustrated after failing to pass the SSC examinations.

On May 6, Popy Akhter, a Dakhil examinee in Savar also took her life after failing to pass the Dakhil examinations. Nova's suicide followed 2 days later.

These cases of student suicide are usually buried in the back pages while students joyously displaying the 'V' sign on results day dominate the front pages every year. In achieving GPA-5 or the exclusive Golden A+, the latter students have supposedly gained victory. The front page stories almost always fail to mention the shame of those who have not managed to get 'perfect' results.

In many cases, suicide is caused by mental illness such as

depression. However, suicidal thoughts or behaviour may be difficult for parents and educators to grasp in a country where mental health is stigmatised.

"Internal pressure to achieve a GPA-5 or golden A+ is strong within students, often more so than expectations from parents and pressure at school," says psychiatrist Dr. M. A. Mohit Kamal. He adds that some students who lack the capacity to cope with failing to achieve the highest grades may then commit impulsive suicide.

Students in Bangladesh are indoctrinated to believe that for admission into top public universities such as Dhaka University, Bangladesh University of Engineering and Technology and Dhaka Medical College, nothing short of perfect scores SSC-onwards will do.

Asfia Anwar, a student of BAF Shaheen College in Mohakhali, passed her SSC exams with flying colours achieving a Golden A+. At the time, she says she was fueled by her desire not to be outdone by her friends and peers at school. "I have to get a Golden GPA-5 in my HSC exams too because otherwise I won't stand a chance at admission in DU and BUET."

This perception stands strong though the minimum requirement for admission into the above universities is a GPA of 3.5. Furthermore, SSC and HSC results are assessed alongside, not instead of,

performance in the admission test of universities.

Of the reported suicides, several of the students decided to take the monumental decision to end their lives due to failing one or two subjects out of a total of 13 students sit for at the SSC examinations.

In cases of lower grades than expectation, Dr. Kamal recommends immediate support following the release of SSC results. "Parents should reassure their children that they can retake exams and family and friends should stay by their side." He stresses that warning signs of depression and suicide should be acted upon immediately – first, parents should try to talk to their children and then encourage them to talk to counselors. More preventive measures can be to ensure building up self-confidence and coping capacity in students from childhood.

The wanton human cost of education is a sign of the institutional and societal failure to protect students. Our education system trains students to prepare for three big exams – SSC, HSC, and university entrance exams. The SSC and equivalent examinations at the end of 10th grade is just the first hurdle.

And, as seen, the casualties are already piling up. ■

### | SOCIETY |

### | SEXUAL HARASSMENT |

When the 23-year-old constable Halima Begum was posted to her new workplace at Gouripur Thana, Mymensingh, her father, Helal Uddin Akand, was ecstatic.

"I was happy that she could come home frequently, as she was now 30 km away from our home in Purbadhala upazila in Netrokona District. But we couldn't have imagined, in our worst nightmare, that the posting which seemed like a blessing to us would result in my daughter's suicide," says Akand.

Halima poured kerosene all over her body and set herself on fire in her room at the barrack, on April 2, 2017. She died on her way to Dhaka, while she was being transferred to Dhaka Medical College Hospital for better treatment.

However, before breathing her last, Halima left behind a statement to the police super of her thana, claiming that she been raped by sub-inspector Mizanul Islam of the same thana and that, in spite of being informed, Delwar Ahmed, officer-in-charge (OC) of the police station, did not take any action.

"It wasn't just her last statement. Five days after her death, when my family members and I went to the barrack to bring back her stuff, we found her diary in one of her bags, where she wrote down the same things," says Helal Uddin Akand, a freedom fighter.

"In fact, we found the written complaint she tried to submit to the OC, but which he refused to accept. It has details of how SI Mizan entered her room and raped her in the absence of her colleague on March 14, 2017," Iqbal Hasan Khan, Halima's maternal uncle tells The Star Weekend.

The written complaint also documented how SI Mizan raped her again on March 17, 2017, this time, using the pretext of a raid to catch a yaba dealer – a female yaba dealer – thus requiring Halima's help.

It also mentioned how another colleague—sub-inspector Ripon, who was informed about the matter, forbade her to file any formal notice. When contacted, the OC denied the allegation that he refused to take Halima's case and informed The Star Weekend that a week before that suicide, SI Mizan apparently made a complaint against Halima that she used to verbally mistreat him repeatedly.

"Apparently Halima used to be harsh with him and often hurled abuses," said the OC. According to Imarat Hossain, one of the investigation officers of this case, the accused SI Mizan has been taken to custody and the whole investigation might take one-two months to finish.

After Halima's death, many media portals were quick to come forth with theories about how she had a relationship with her rapist – as if that, in any way, minimises the severity of the crime. However, none of the media reports could provide an authentic source to such claims.

Halima's case is not a rare one. On October, 2016, a female police constable from Khulshi Thana of Chittagong was raped by her ex-husband, sub-inspector Sanjay Das of Rangunia Thana. A year before that, a female constable of Turag

Thana was gang raped by her ex-husband, sub-inspector Kalimur Rahman of the Khilgaon Thana and his friends. However, many of these cases go unreported, regarded as "internal issues" of law enforcement authorities and kept, for the most part, confidential.

There is such a high tendency to hush the incidents of sexual violence within the police that, when a study of

share that they have to face sexual harassment at the workplace. Sexual violence does not always mean rape or physical violence; it may also be verbal or mental harassment. "In my six years, I have found many male colleagues who want to flirt with us about our outfits, appearance or sometimes very private issues," says a female constable on conditions of anonymity. "When it

Similar experiences were recounted by the participants of the CHRI's study. The study concluded that when a female police encounters sexual harassment, she does not report it thinking she would get punished, or her character will be attacked. As such, the offence gets normalised.

Fatema Begum, the first woman Additional Inspector General of Bangladesh Police and the first President of Bangladesh Police Women Network (BPWN), notes that it is really unfortunate that sexual harassment occurs in the police department. "But if anyone thinks that she would be victimised for making any complaints, she can make complaints to the BPWN. They have a helpline as well in this regard," she states.

However, The Star Weekend could not reach the helpline, even after trying for five days at a stretch.

Dr AFM Masum Rabbani, Addl. DIG (Special Crime) argues that sexual harassment of female cops are isolated incidents, and as such, "There is no need to generalise the problem." However, he adds, "BPWN has been working in this regard independently, and we have also formed complaint committee in all our police stations, as per the high court order. If we find any case regarding this, we always try to take prompt action."

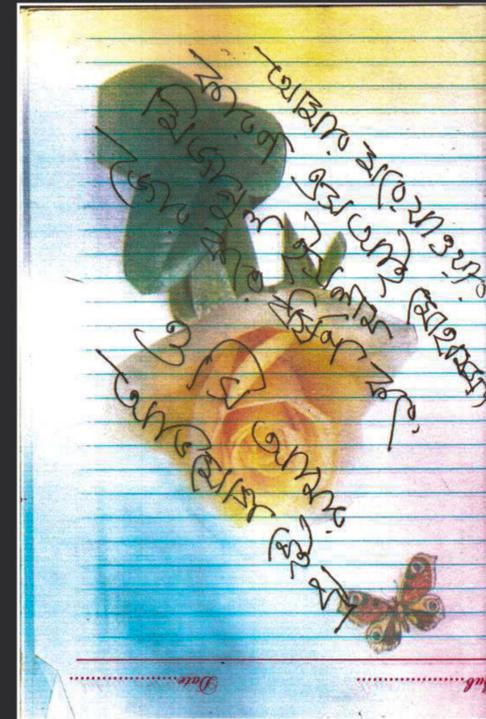
If there is a serious offence like rape, the convict is usually dismissed from his job and tried as per the Women and Children Repression Prevention Act, 2000 informs Dr Rabbani. However, if it is a lesser offence in the eyes of the law, such as verbal sexual harassment, it is not necessarily handled as a criminal offence. There are three processes by which the perpetrator gets punished—rank reversion, dismissal from service, and forced retirement from the service. Meanwhile, if the allegation of sexual harassment cannot be proved, BPWN helps "manage" the situation by transferring the complainant or the accused to the various units of police.

Fawzia Khondker, who worked as a gender specialist on UNDP's Police Reform Programme (PRP), says that the PRP had drafted a gender policy for Bangladesh Police and submitted it to BPWN a year ago. "The gender policy insists on a zero tolerance on sexual violence, and if approved, would ensure that perpetrators are punished following the legal procedure. It is crucial that allegations of sexual violence are taken seriously by the police at all levels, and BPWN needs to more empower to take the necessary actions."

Had Halima received a prompt and gender sensitive response from her superior when she filed her complaint, she might still be alive. In order to ensure that no female police face a similar fate as Halima, the police, as an institution, needs to create an environment in which female police feel safe to raise complaints of sexual harassment, knowing that adequate action will be taken against her perpetrator. Unless we can end the culture of impunity of male police—and the corresponding silence of female police—we will not be able to foster such an environment. ■

## WHY WOMEN POLICE DON'T REPORT SEXUAL VIOLENCE

NILIMA JAHAN



A copy of Halima's suicide note obtained from her family.

Commonwealth Human Rights Initiative (CHRI) revealed last November that at least 10 percent female constables, three percent female Assistant sub-inspectors and two percent sub-inspectors, are victims of sexual harassment, the police completely denied it. AKM Shahidul Haque, the Inspector General of Police (IGP) remarked that the data was totally baseless. He argued that no one can prove such statements and that there are no instances of sexual harassment of female cops (Prothom Alo, November 22, 2016).

Female cops we interviewed, however,

happened the first time, I spoke up and told them that I don't like such flirting, but then they started making fun of me, and within a few days, they made me feel like an outsider, isolated from everyone else," she adds.

When asked why she didn't report to her respective authority, she says that since it is a male-dominated force, the complaint may have resulted in more victimisation, with rumours being spread about her, or her being transferred to another station. Rather, one of her co-workers suggested that she ignore the issue.