

IMAGE: KAZI TAHSIN AGAZ APURBO

# SILENCED BYSTANDERS

*Teachers are helpless upon encountering child sexual abuse*

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The “Know Your Vowels” poster on the walls of this primary school classroom does not really give away the fact that I am here to meet sexual abuse victims.

One of the teachers of this school had decided to break the silence and seek help for a student of hers who is regularly sexually abused at home. What she discovered is that her colleague from the school was dealing with a similar problem. What they also discovered is this—there was nothing they could do about it.

It is these two teachers and the two victims I am meeting. The school we are in is in a place called Gawair, deep into the belly of Dakkhinkhan. With the nearest city bus only accessible after travelling a distance in battery-operated three-wheelers, this place is as inner-city as it gets. The road leading to the school is under ankle-deep water even though it hasn't rained in several days. The school itself is a weather-beaten building whose walls haven't seen a coat of paint in years.

Plaster hangs in large cracked webs from the ceiling, and not everyone has a pair of school shoes. The field is completely devoid of turf and has turned into a swamp, while a garbage dump and an uncovered septic tank lies right beside it.

“I was talking to my students about touch and consent. This is a rough neighbourhood, and my children have to grow up here, so I thought this was important for their safety,” says Shathi (not her real name) one of the two teachers. “She came up to me after class and broke down in tears.” Shathi didn't have to ask what was wrong.

She asked the student who did it. “It was the neighbourhood Quran teacher,” she continues, “He is highly regarded among the staff here at the school.”

*The Star Weekend* is refraining from disclosing the identity of the teachers

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who spoke out to this correspondent, so that they cannot be held culpable for not reporting the abuses to the police. It is not as if the teachers did not try to get legal help for the children—except it involved a process that could potentially jeopardise the family.

The teacher contacted a legal aid association to see if something could be

done. “They told me that my only option is to ask the parents to bring the child over to their shelter,” says Shathi. That was her first point of hesitation—would the victim then be separated from her family?

Nevertheless, Shathi asked the student to bring her parents over to the school to talk—but the child came alone the next morning. Everything is okay, there is no reason to talk to the parents, is what the student had said, leaving the teacher confused about what to do next.

What would help her, I ask. “What I want is for someone who can give them a workshop, or provide counsel,” Shathi laments—that is, not drag them to the police and put them in a shelter for victims, just as the primary measure.

## Dilemma of working parents

Shathi's student shoulders more responsibility than others her age because of having two working parents who are away for long hours.

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## SILENCED BYSTANDERS

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“I stay alone at home after school gets over at 2 pm until my mother comes back from work,” says the girl. “Both my parents are garments workers in Dakkhinkhan Super Tex.” Daycare is a luxury her parents cannot afford.

When Shathi played a game asking everyone about their after-school activity as a way of practising new English words, her answer was “cooking”—she prepares her own lunch. Not exactly on the same level as her soccer-playing, tree-climbing, storybook-reading classmates. It was during these after-school hours that her neighbour and Arabic teacher sexually abused her, presumes Shathi.

This is the kind of demographic that most of the urban primary school kids belong to. Most of the children have two working parents who stay out for long hours, a majority of them working in the RMG sector. Almost all parents are forced to leave their children alone, or in the care of their neighbours throughout the day. In the case of our victims, one was abused because she stayed alone.

welfare system to turn to for help,” she says. In other countries where the franchise operates, more robust systems exist for victim protection and abuse prevention, she adds. Most developed countries have designated school counselors teachers can turn to for help. “If we can empower our teachers, we can do something about it, because they are the first ones to know when abuse is happening,” argues Atuly.

This is what these two teachers realised as well.

“I was talking to them about sexual abuse because the children get exposed to so much violence while living here,” says Leena. She had noticed behavioural differences in a way that only someone who spends six to eight hours a day with a child can. “Some older kids had shown some of my little boys porn and they were mimicking some inappropriate motions in class. I was afraid that they would implement things they saw on their female classmates and so I felt that even at such a young age, I needed to teach them about abuse.”

That was when the other stories came out. The children told the teachers about shopkeepers who hugged them inappropriately, or older neighbors who

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The other was abused by her uncle who is her caregiver after school. This child was a quiet one who responded to me with a shy smile and pulled down her *hijab* to hide her face. “My father is a construction worker, and my mother works outside as well,” she said, her hazel eyes downcast.

Her teacher Leena (not her real name) explains to me later. “I was talking about abuse in class, and two of my students came up to me and told me that they had peeked through the window and seen their friend being grabbed by her uncle. He was grabbing her face and had his mouth on her ear, she did not look happy at all,” describes Leena. The uncle lived with them.

What makes her think that was a case of molestation, I ask. “The uncle noticed the kids peeking and closed the shutters,” she says.

## Teachers first responders

Statistics about child sexual abuse victims are very hard to find because of huge levels of underreporting even though the phenomenon is not at all uncommon. Afsana Sadiq Atuly is a leadership development associate with Teach for Bangladesh, the country charter of an international organisation providing teachers in lower-income schools. “Quite a few of our teachers are struggling with cases of sexual abuse and they do not have an effective social

touched them in places they should not have. For neighborhoods like the one these children live in, the teachers are usually the first—and sometimes the only—people who can do something about abuse when they see it happening.

## Afraid to seek help

The fact that Shathi's student had come up to her teacher willingly to talk about her abuse, but rescinded her statement later says volumes about the kind of barriers children face when asking for help. A child who is young enough to read picture books had the presence of mind to understand all that she will have to go through if the secret got out, and so decided not to talk. The other alternative theory is that the victim had told her parents about it and they had asked her to keep quiet. Nobody knows what the truth is.

The only form of help available to these teachers and their students, is the National Child Helpline—but that comes with a caveat: cases of sexual violence almost invariably qualify as police cases. When everybody is staying quiet, what is the chance that they will seek legal help?

This is how the child helpline works: an anonymous call leads to an investigation by the Department of Social Services, who in turn involve the police should the case call for it. As per law, sexual violence is a crime mandating police involvement. From

October 2015 to April 2017, the helpline received a total 97,567 calls and out of this, 6,786 cases were dealt with as police cases, said Chowdhury Md. Mohaimen, the coordinator of the Bangladesh Child Helpline.

“Without a good way to protect the child's identity, a police case would further victimise the survivor and her family, and can take years to get resolved,” says Leena, expressing her concern. “I don't mind going to the police on behalf of my children, but I'm afraid that the children themselves will not admit it—or the parents would not let them.”

Leena had made a visit to her student's home to talk about the abuse. Neither of the student's parents admitted it. “I felt like her mother knew—she was silent the entire time that I was there. The

had always stayed far away from boys, but now she has started to loosen up.”

An actual medical process takes place when a child undergoes sexual abuse at such a young age.

“Researchers have found specific changes in a key part of the brain, the hippocampus, in those who have been maltreated in childhood,” wrote Dr Mehtab Gazi Rahman in an opinion piece for *The Daily Star* last month. “Those children who have experienced abuse have been found to have reduction in brain volume in two parts of the hippocampus: the pre-subiculum and subiculum. These brain changes leave a person more vulnerable to anxiety, depression and post-traumatic stress disorder in adulthood,” says the psychiatrist working for National Health Services in the UK.

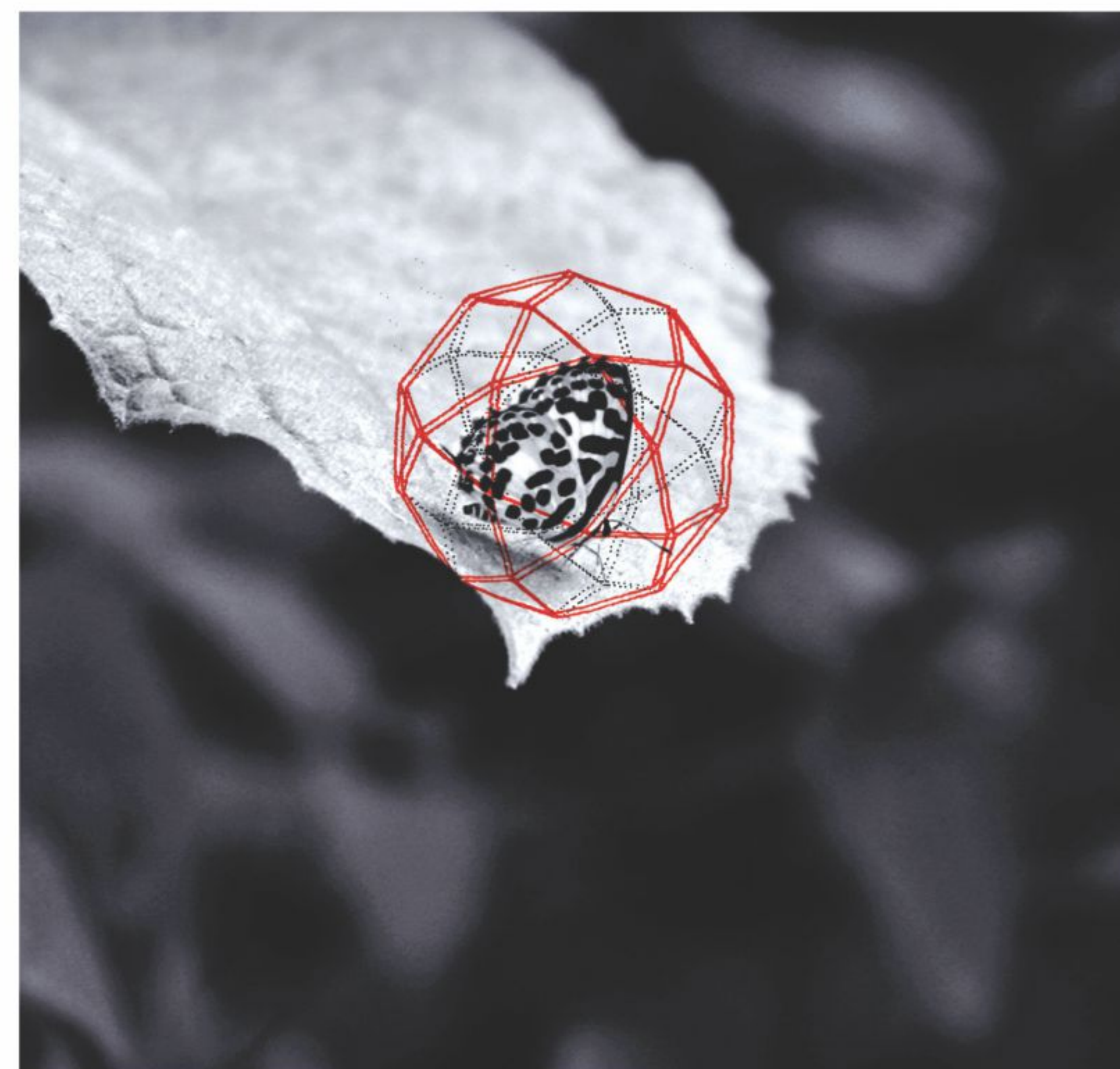


IMAGE: KAZI TAHSIN AGAZ APURBO

father agreed that child abuse must be prevented, but gave no indication of knowing that his own brother was molesting his daughter,” says Leena. Put in such a situation where silence is the norm, Leena is not sure legal help is the right way to go.

## A lifelong bind

When abuse does not get reported because of a fear of the kind of remedial measures being taken, there is always a risk that the situation can escalate. According to an editorial published by *The Daily Star* in March, 145 children were raped in three months, of whom 50 were killed. For the victim, the trauma is unquestionably there for as long as the threat is present.

“My student only started to become more engaging in class when her parents got a separate home from her uncle,” adds Leena, describing the trauma her student went through, “Previously she

In short—the abuse makes the child incapable of developing regions needed to cope with stress—and effects that lasts well into adulthood.

As long as there is no investigation into the abuses being faced by these children, there will be no sure way of knowing exactly what they went through—and whether they need medical help. When it feels as if nothing can be done, the teachers stagnate in hopelessness. Sitting in the staffroom, the teachers talk about how it can get so difficult to gather solidarity among their colleagues to do something to help the children.

“Just right now a colleague of mine fabricated a community visit feedback form because she does not want to visit the family,” says one of the teachers. “She can do nothing to really help and she just wants to disengage from the personal lives of her students,” she adds, “What's the point, really?” ■