

REMEMBERING YASMIN

# Lessons we should have learned from her murder



UPASHANA SALAM

**W**HEN 14-year-old Yasmin Akhter was reassured by some police officers that they would drop her home after she missed her bus to Dhaka from Dinajpur, she probably didn't think twice about it.

Like many of us, she probably believed that she would be safe with these protectors of law.

A day later, her body was found by the side of a road.

Yasmin was brutally murdered 22 years ago on August 24, 1995. And two of the three police officers involved in her murder were arrested two years later in 1997. While the delay in justice is definitely troubling, what is more worrisome is that nothing was done until the entire district of Dinajpur protested the crime, taking up arms and besieging a police station in the district for two days until the police opened fire against the protesters, killing seven. It took a massive people's movement for the government to sit up and take notice of the crime committed by officers within a law enforcement body.

Unsurprisingly, the local police tried to block investigation processes and at first had even refused to lodge the case in an effort to save their colleagues and consequently, the "image" of their force. "This blatant act of blocking the investigation and creating barriers for justice to be served clearly shows how our society is shaped and reacts to violence against women," President of the National Women's Association Ayesha Khanam said. However, women rights activists and ordinary citizens continued tirelessly to demand justice for Yasmin until the three policemen were finally arrested in 1997.

Police interference in the case was noticeable since the beginning. Instead of carrying out investigations to prove to the public that their safety is the first priority for law enforcement agencies, the police and other administration forces claimed that no crime had taken place. At first, they refused to file a case. And then they tried to tamper with the evidence. During the proceedings, Advocate Zaed Al-Mamun had reported to the media that Yasmin's autopsy was first conducted by some civil surgeons of Dinajpur who concluded that Yasmin was not raped. After continued protests and movements by activists



and citizens, a board consisting of principals of some medical colleges was finally formed. Her body had to be exhumed and it was finally proven that she had been raped. Zaed further added that instead of being served with strict punishments so as to deter future tampering of evidence, the officials who submitted a false report were released after a trial.

Yasmin's death brought attention to the flawed legal system of the country which took two years to arrest the perpetrators and almost nine years to execute their punishment. People from all over Bangladesh protested against the crime, united in their demand for justice. For the first time in the history of the country, policemen were tried and sentenced to capital punishment.

But 22 years after her death, Yasmin has more or less been forgotten. Most people don't even know the name of the young girl whose gruesome death provoked a mass movement and brought women's rights issues to the forefront. Yasmin, once a symbol of the fight against influential, powerful perpetrators of

crime, is now shoved into the background, a lost name in the growing list of victims of unrequited lust and violence.

Which is why we see the murder of a young Tonu go unpunished to this day. Over a year after her body was recovered from a jungle near her house in Mainamati Cantonment, and despite numerous protests, no headway has been made in this case. In fact, Tonu's story is hauntingly similar to that of Yasmin. The first autopsy report concluded that there was no sign of murder or rape, drawing widespread criticism. No arrests have been made so far. Public conscience is fickle, and as is often the case, Tonu's murder which initially created an uproar, has now become a fading memory.

Female victims of any crime, be it domestic violence, sexual harassment, abuse and torture, find it extremely difficult to find justice in a society that insists on stigmatising them for a crime committed against them. However, it appears that women from less privileged classes find it almost impossible to even demand justice, let alone get access to it. Even feminist discourses continue to focus on the

abuse meted out to privileged women of a certain class, and stories of women belonging to poorer backgrounds are lost in the crowd of numbers and statistics.

And this leads to the next, more prevalent problem in our society—the denial of a rape culture. For those who don't know what this means, rape culture is one in which sexual violence is common, accepted, normalised, and even pardoned in a society. Rape is so common in Bangladesh that many feel only a slight annoyance, or worse, indifference when they hear or read about such incidents. Even when a recent incident that took place in a hotel in the capital's Banani was exposed, many came forward to claim that the survivors' allegations were false or they were women of "loose character" and deserved what they got. As cases time and again have proven, our society is more willing to put the blame on the victim for "inciting" sexual violence than on the perpetrator whose act is condoned only because he is a man with "natural urges". When a rape survivor tries to lodge a complaint, she's besieged with intrusive

questions: "Where've you been touched; show us the place; are you sure you were raped?"

In fact, after Yasmin's rape and murder and the involvement of police officials in this case came to light, many, including members of the police force, were quick to assert that she was a prostitute, an "unchaste" woman whose life is of no consequence. Irrespective of the fallacy of the claim, this only goes to show how much importance we give to the sexual morality of women, so much so that law enforcement agencies consider this as an easy excuse to seek pardon for its members!

A 2013 United Nations study based on anonymous interviews with more than 10,000 men aged 18 to 49 years from Bangladesh, China, Cambodia, Indonesia, Sri Lanka and Papua New Guinea showed that nearly a quarter of the men surveyed in this region said to have raped a woman at least once in their life. Almost three quarters of those who admitted to have committed rape said they did not experience any legal consequences.

Society normalises rape by humiliating and sanctioning violence against women in the name of social norms, says human rights activist and Executive Director of Ain O Salish Kendra Sultana Kamal. "Family and the society are places where indoctrination and socialisation of patriarchal values nurturing principles of male hegemony over women—which motivates both men and women to accept it as natural—takes place. The socialisation process ensures men's control and disciplining power over women's body, mobility and labour," she says.

Twenty two years after the death of Yasmin and we still have to protest and sometimes plead for justice to be rendered on time to survivors and victims of rape and abuse. Thousands of Yasmins have been abused in the years following her death—their souls crushed; their voices unheard. Yasmin is gone but her death should have served as a platform to not only launch a dialogue, but actually realise a safe environment for women. Until our society, our law enforcers, the state, the government and the world at large begin to see women as actual human beings, not just as someone's mother, sister, wife, we will continue to see such heinous crimes being committed with impunity.

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This article has been adapted and updated from a 2015-piece by the author.

## Society at a crossroads



SELINA MOHSIN

**T**HE economy of Bangladesh is growing fast with a GDP growth rate of 7.5 percent. Primary education enrolment has

grown; private universities and hospitals have increased. Many individuals have become wealthy in the RMG sector, leather industries, light engineering, pharmaceuticals and others. Yet, as the country is advancing, much of its social fabric is disintegrating into violence.

Girls and women are the worst victims. Their status in the social hierarchy remains low and conservative male dominated attitudes have not kept up with social changes.

The poor are still with us. Poverty in 2010 was 31.5 percent. Poverty has a distinct gender bias. In all regions of the world women are poorer than men. In Bangladesh cultural, traditional and dowry related practices make women especially vulnerable.

In 1979, the United Nations General Assembly adopted The Convention on the Elimination of all forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW). Bangladesh ratified CEDAW, with reservation on Article 2.13.1 (a) and 16.1 (c). In 2009, Bangladesh National Women Lawyers' Association appealed to the High Court and a sexual harassment law was enacted on CEDAW principles.

But the situation appears to have deteriorated. Ain O Salish Kendra (ASK) reports that in the first half of 2017, 280 women were raped, 39 escaped attempted rape, 16 died after rape and 5 committed suicides to avoid being raped.

Divorce once held disgrace for women, even if they were innocent. They were expected to keep the family together, be submissive and economically dependent on their husbands. Now, with access to education, many women are unwilling to bear violence. In Dhaka North City Corporation 28,355 divorces were issued from 2011 to 2016. In 2011, out of 2,864 divorce

notices, 1,773 were initiated by women. But what of the children of these broken marriages? They face trauma and loss of family security, and often turn to drugs and violence themselves.

Another acutely disturbing trend is violence and murder perpetrated by men of different interest groups for personal gains. Sometimes, these murders are horrific. Such extreme cruelty depicts a monstrous side of human nature.

Furthermore, Bangladesh is suffering from "youth bulge", where over 40 percent of the population consist of young people—aged between 18 and 24. Many of them are neither adequately educated nor employed. A 2014 report found that 5 out of 10 graduates were unemployed and frustrated. Such frustration too can lead to violence.

Poor education, parental conflicts, fractured family values are breeding grounds for youth gangs. Coming from disruptive families they want to belong to groups, and in the absence of better alternatives can end in gangs. On August 5, 2017 a school boy named Raju, who was murdered by members of a rival gang. This is a phenomenon in both urban and rural areas, and the rivalry is growing.

Wealthy young men with cars, smart-phones and Internet access develop feelings of power. Some are open to radicalism. The Gulshan attack of July 1, 2016 at a restaurant shocked the country when it was revealed that four of the militant youths were from affluent families and had received modern education! Was it bad parenting, violence at home, indoctrination or a desire for adventure that turned them into religious extremists?

At the other end of society, child domestic workers routinely face harassment. Housewives, themselves subject to violent abuses, treat domestic workers inhumanly—beating and sometimes even killing them. According to ASK, in 2016, 40 domestic workers aged 23 to 18—some even younger—died.

What lies behind this social degeneration? Bangladesh is already the most densely populated country in the world. Decrease in the man-

to-land ratio has led to migration into cities or abroad. Then there are issues of housing shortages, communication difficulties, pollution, health hazards, unemployment and poor education. Such problems are acute in a period of rapid social change and rising aspirations.

Throughout the world, cities are growth and wealth centres, but in Bangladesh, the urban landscape has continually deteriorated. Land grabbers have taken over 80 percent of khas land and most of the major khal systems in greater Dhaka, identified by JICA in 1984, have vanished and river beds were encroached upon for illegal gains.

Crowded high rise buildings have left little room for playgrounds, spaces for recreation or communal activities. Restless young people can be vulnerable to extremist indoctrination. What can be done, by government and by citizens, to tackle this deep social malaise?

What is needed to reduce violence and create a more stable society?

Wider, better quality educational, vocational and technical training opportunities are needed. NGOs and the private sector do contribute, but the government's budget for education and training must quadruple. Education has to be relevant, analytical, promote cognitive skills to increase the ability of students to adapt to diverse situations. Proficiency in English or another international language promotes employment. Teachers need rigorous training at home and abroad.

Better health facilities and larger proportion of the national budget should be dedicated to health services.

Appropriate counselling services should be made available to parents to promote good parenting and pleasant home environments.

Greater community involvement with the young should be established. The authorities need to establish community centres for sports and cultural activities where these are not present.

Better quality policing and security should be promoted so that the young can refrain from violence and channel their energies creatively.

Some control over students' exposure to social media should be

considered. Educational enrichment through projects commensurate with their ages—such as making a fish pond if there is space, planting and nurturing trees, writing plays and acting them out for entertainment, making simple computers, mobile phones or other gadgets—can be better alternatives.

And lastly, school curriculum should include a section on "good citizenship" to create a supportive

environment.

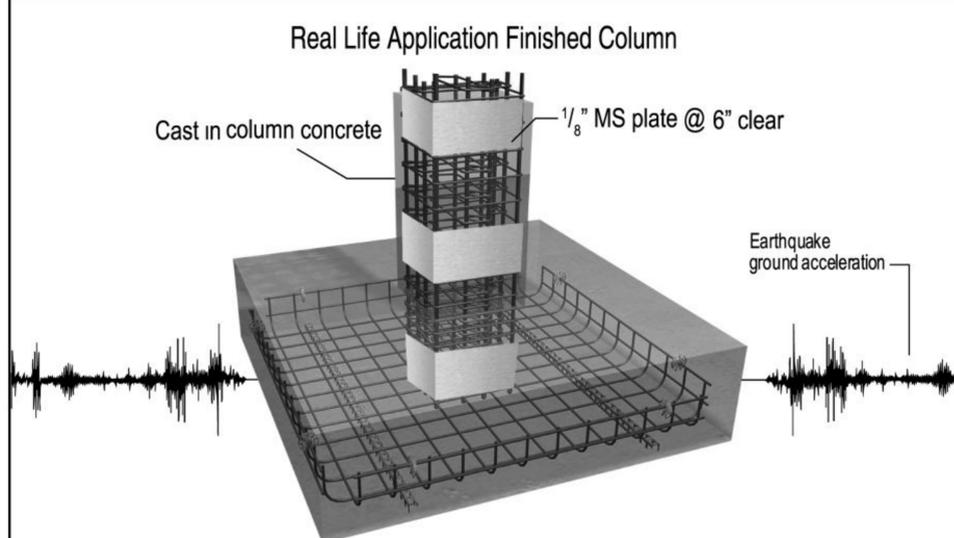
Of course, it is easier to create such a wish-list than to put it into effect. Governments struggle to raise adequate tax revenues. Corruption, patronage and lack of transparency weaken their effectiveness. All citizens, business and social groups should realise that they must participate, not only by making demands on the government, but by their own example and in their

families and communities.

We need to face these challenges if we are to reach a stage where the many UN conventions and government acts can be implemented judiciously, and the society can regain stability. The government must take the lead, but in the end, everyone must take up this challenge individually.

Professor Selina Mohsin is a former ambassador and secretary.

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