

# STALKING VICTIMS BEING FAILED

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PHOTO: STAR FILE (STAGED PHOTO)

In July 2017 alone, 22 females were stalked, one of whom committed suicide due to stalker harassment. A further 14 people were collateral damage for protesting stalking of the victims, of whom two men were killed and 11 people injured. Though females overwhelmingly constitute targets of stalking and sexual harassment, male family members and relatives protesting often too suffer violence at the hands of stalkers.

In a widely publicised case in August of last year, Suraiya Akhter Risha, an eighth grader at Willes Little Flower School and College in Kakrail of the capital, was stabbed by her stalker on a footbridge near her school on her way home. According to her mother, Obaidul Khan had stalked her over the phone three months before the stabbing. Khan had access to her number from the tailoring shop where he worked and where Risha was a customer.

According to state machinery, Risha could have lodged a general diary with the police, which should ideally have led to an investigation into Khan, and potentially saved Risha's life. Officer-in-charge (OC) of Ramna police station, Moshir Rahman, says that a GD had not been lodged earlier.

What prevents victims like Risha—and Sonia from Brahmanbaria who was stabbed in July by her stalker—from complaining to the police?

To begin with, there is no logistical support to investigate these cases at the thana, and such complaints (if a GD is lodged) are referred to the Dhaka Metropolitan Police (DMP) cyber crimes unit for investigation, according to OC Rahman.

## Limitations of the police

Lodging a GD entails the victim writing a complaint in the GD book at the local thana. A GD can be lodged for anything from a lost wallet to stalker harassment. It is an entry of every complaint brought to the thana.

However, a GD being lodged does not necessarily mean that the complaint has been investigated. "We only investigate if the complaint is serious. Many complaints are lodged with us regarding cases of domestic disputes, for example, which are of a personal nature, and so do not warrant a police investigation," says OC Rahman.



PHOTO: STAR FILE (STAGED PHOTO)

If the investigation of a GD yields evidence of harassment or violence, a case is then filed against the perpetrator(s) and they are arrested by the police. Until then, victims of stalking are still at risk. Police protection, however, is not an option. "It is not possible to provide individual protection to all those who request it, except for VIPs," says OC Rahman.

There are no records kept at police headquarters of the number of GDs lodged across all thanas each week or each month or over a year. Around 20 to 30 GDs are lodged at Shahbag police station every day, which has a staff of 70 officers to handle these. "Response time [to GDs] varies case-by-case," says Abul Hasan, OC of Shahbag police station.

According to Assistant Inspector General (AIG) Sahely Ferdous at Bangladesh police headquarters, normal response time to the lodging of a GD is 24 hours. An investigation, however, is often delayed by more than this time due to the demands of many GDs, duty for VIPs, and other operational demands at each thana across the country. "Exceptions are made in case of emergencies, to investigate serious GDs timely," says AIG Ferdous.

This was not, however, the case for a garment worker who sought to lodge a GD at the Banani police station in March of this year against four youths who had harassed her. She requested assistance for five hours and was made to pay BDT 300 before the GD was lodged by the police.

Worried for her safety on her way home to Korail from the police station late at night, she was denied a police escort. The following day, she was raped by the same men who had harassed her earlier and who had received word of the GD lodged against them. This was a case of police negligence starting from the OC of the station himself, who, the rape survivor claimed, subsequently refused to file her rape case.

As the case above illustrates, even a matter of 24 hours can have life and death consequences for victims of stalking and sexual harassment. That is, if the police investigate at all. This is on top of the fact that the victim had to also pay a bribe to try and ensure her safety.

Women are also reluctant to go to the police for fear of relating experiences of sexual harassment to mainly male policemen and the not-unlikely possibility of being further harassed there. An ActionAid Bangladesh study on safety in public spaces in four major cities last year found that 30 percent of women experienced sexual harassment and 35 percent faced what they considered physical torture at police stations.

"In many cases, perpetrators are locally influential so victims and their families are discouraged from reporting such cases to the police," says Fahmina Taskin, a gender expert at Odhikar.

Police limitations aside, inaction by the police when GDs are lodged beforehand is worrying and can deter victims of stalking from coming forward. ■

## HARASSMENT

## SPOTLIGHT

# CYCLONE & FLOOD IN BANGLADESH



Breeding ground of tropical cyclones due to **conical shape** of the Bay of Bengal

Resulting in **15** severe cyclones over last **50** years

**3** MOST DEVASTATING CYCLONES

FACTORING: WIND SPEED SURGE HEIGHT CASUALTIES

**1970** 5,00,000

224 km/h 10 m

**1991** 1,38,882

225 km/h 7.6 m

**2007** 3000

220 km/h 4.5 m

**3** MOST FLOOD AFFECTED PERIODS

**1988** 89,970 sq-km

61%

**1998** 1,00,250 sq-km

68%

**2007** 62,300 sq-km

42%



As far as food security is concerned, 2016 was a great year for Bangladesh. The confidence of the government was so high that it had actually put in place a plan to export 40-50 lakh tonnes of rice in May last year.

## Drastic increase in flood coverage

An analysis of the flood statistics in Bangladesh displays an ominous trend. Numbers from the Bangladesh Water Development Board (BWDB) suggest that the intensity of floods—when the flood coverage is taken into account—in Bangladesh has been increasing with time.

In the last 30 years, from 1987 to 2017, the country witnessed seven floods that inundated or devoured more than one-third of the nation. Prior to that, between 1956 to 1986, this benchmark was surpassed just once, in 1974.

Each of these floods has caused plenty of destruction and havoc, and the increase in

# AN OMINOUS TREND

frequency is not good news.

In between 1980 to 1990, more than 35 percent of the nation went under water twice, first in 1987 and then in 1988. In 1987, close to 40 percent of the country was under water, while more than 60 percent of the nation was below water in 1988.

The period between 1990 and 2000 witnessed a more threatening trend. From 1995 to 2000, the country witnessed floods, which consistently inundated more than 20 percent of the country every year. This includes the disastrous floods of 1998, which saw 70 percent of the country drown. These were by far

the worst floods Bangladesh had ever witnessed.

In between 2000 and 2010, 40 percent of the nation went under water in 2004 and 2007. The assessment period for this year is still underway, but it is certain that more than 40 percent of the country has already been affected in 2017. There is a fear that this number may increase.

Dr Atiq Rahman, Executive Director of Bangladesh Centre for Advanced Studies (BCAS) and an eminent climate expert, agrees that floods are becoming more and more intense every year. He, however, bases his statement on more than just the

Statistics related to floods and cyclones display a dramatic increase in intensity in the last three decades in Bangladesh and experts fear that the trend is likely to get worse.

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PHOTO: ZIAUL HAQUE OISHARJH

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