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The month of October is yet to come to an end, but the country has already witnessed at least 15 deaths by suicide. It won't be a surprise if that number increases—statistics show that thousands commit suicide in Bangladesh every year.

More recently, the issue of suicide has received significant coverage due to the Blue Whale Challenge, a game which compels its participants to commit suicide towards the end. Although Bangladesh is yet to confirm a victim, there have been cases where teenagers have reportedly attempted to commit suicide because of this game.

We are not sure whether the game has actually reached Bangladesh, but a segment of our media—especially online portals—have stirred the public imagination by presenting these incidents with glamorous titles, melodramatic depictions and sensationalist pictures of the people who attempted to commit suicide.

The way a number of these reports have been written raises the question: can the sensational language or the explicit description of the attempted suicides, or even the horrifying visuals, have pushed vulnerable people to danger?

A report titled “Preventing Suicide: A Resource for Media Professionals” jointly prepared by the World Health

factors that lead people to take the final step, and suggest ways for potential victims to seek help and prevent suicidal thoughts.

WHO recommends that journalists “avoid language which sensationalises or normalises suicide, or presents it as a solution to problems.” Particular attention should be given while crafting the headlines, lest they glorify suicide as a way out of a difficult situation. In fact, WHO recommends not using the word “suicide” in the title at all.

“We often see titles like ‘Girl commits suicide over stalking’, but isn't it disseminating a wrong message to society? We must prevent stalking and work against it at an individual, family and societal level, but we should not glorify suicide as a means of protest, so that other people do not get inspired to follow it,” says Anisul Haque, Associate Editor, *Prothom Alo*.

“Every media house should have a guideline on how to report on this issue. Or organisations for journalists, for example, Press Council, Press Institute of Bangladesh (PIB) or government and non-government organisations which work with the media can create it for them,” Haque urges.

Dr Mekhala Sarkar, Assistant Professor of Psychiatry, National Institute of Mental Health, informs *Star*



ARE WE COVERING SUICIDE RESPONSIBLY?

NILIMA JAHAN

Organisation (WHO) and International Association for Suicide Prevention (IASP) mentions that, based on investigations of 50 suicides that had the potential to be imitative or copycat, reporting cases of suicide in the media can encourage suicidal behaviour. WHO and IASP also provide some recommendations for media professionals for reporting on suicide, as the issue requires a high degree of understanding and sensitivity.

The report suggests that reporters should educate people about the various myths and misconceptions of suicide. For example, journalists tend to oversimplify the causes of suicide and attribute the deaths merely to failing exams, loss of a job or relationship problems. It must be kept in mind that committing suicide is not always the result of a single event.

The question of mental health enters here. The media must focus on the mental health aspect, along with the cultural, genetic and socio-economic



IMAGE: KAZI TAHSIN AGAZ APURBO

The statistics related to Bangladesh are equally alarming. As per the 2015 World Health Statistics data visualisation dashboard, the suicide mortality rate in Bangladesh is 5.5 for every 100,000 people. Data from police headquarters reveals that the total number of suicides (by taking poison and hanging) from 2012 to August 2017 was 7,359.

Weekend that reporting on suicide needs caution as people who are at a vulnerable stage might be influenced by them. “For example, when a prominent figure dies by suicide and the media highlights it, it can have a negative effect on vulnerable people. It makes them think that suicide can be the ultimate

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solution for them as well. Even creating a sympathetic tone in your suicide report can have a similar effect,” she says.

The placement and illustrations also require special attention. And for this, WHO suggests that suicide reports should not be published on the front page. Rather, stories about suicides should ideally be published in the inner pages, towards the bottom.

On the other hand, if it is a television report, it should be telecast long after the lead news. The same goes for radio reporting. In terms of visuals, we must be aware of not giving too much prominence to photographs of young persons or explicit pictures and videos of the dead body nor use excessive images.

Another important point is that while taking an interview of a person who lost

pressure for the bereaved family members that lead them to taking their own lives,” Zaman says.

Analysts have described the coverage of the Blue Whale Challenge by some channels as excessive. This eventually creates a strong sensation about the game on social media and makes people even more curious about it. It also leads people to come to premature conclusions about a death, without considering the complex reality of the victim's life.

Parents of an eighth-grader who took her life blamed the game for her death. While many reports were published the following day, attributing the death to the game, the police failed to find any such signs.

Certain newspapers even mentioned that approximately 61 people in Bangladesh have lost their lives because of this game, despite the fact that there is no evidence of such data. WHO strictly mentions that media reports on suicides



IMAGE: KAZI TAHSIN AGAZ APURBO

someone close due to suicide, the reporter must be conscious of the fact that the trauma of a bereaved person is no less than the person who completed the process. These people are considered to be at risk of taking their lives as well.

According to Joysree Zaman, a journalist at Bangladesh Sangbad Sangstha (BSS) and the Founder of Brighter Tomorrow, a social movement to prevent suicide, we must avoid glossing over the complex realities while interacting with family members or close friends who have lost their loved ones.

“After my children Alim and Chirasree committed suicide in 2014, the media were quick to point out that they were drug addicts. They also wondered if I had a relationship with a guy. These allegations were groundless. Such attitudes of journalists may cause added

must provide authentic and reliable sources and that statistics should be interpreted carefully and correctly.

“We need awareness, but we should bear in mind that by giving a horrific description of the game and its steps, we are giving too much importance to the game and popularising it unnecessarily. Rather, we should create awareness among parents about the excessive addiction to virtual games and the internet and their alienation from friends and family. We don't need to glorify the name of a single game,” says Mekhala Sarkar.

Dr Nehal Karim, Professor at the Department of Sociology of the University of Dhaka, also argues that what happened in other parts of the world might not be easily adopted by our country. “Since there are rumours of

its existence in Bangladesh, we should wait some more time. But excessive reporting on it is compelling teenagers to search for this game online,” he says.

Seeking help

A 2014 report titled “Preventing Suicide: A Global Imperative” published by WHO shows that every year, at least eight lakh people commit suicide, and 78 percent of global suicides occur in low and middle-income countries.

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The preventive measures of suicide are too often ignored by our researchers, health policy makers as well as society as

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a whole. In a country where mental health is still taboo, no significant strategies have been developed through which a large number of people, who contemplate suicide every day, can get emotional support to address their mental health issues.

Arun Das, volunteer co-coordinator of *Kaan Pete Roi*, the country's first ever emotional support and suicide prevention helpline, says, “We believe that if a person contemplates suicide, a proper space to share his/her problems without any further tension through active listening and a non-judgemental and empathetic mind can be a big help.”

Kaan Pete Roi basically follows the befriending model that is quite familiar in many developed countries. Since its inception, it has attended nearly 13,000 calls in four years through 200 trained volunteers. Currently, the organisation has 60 helpline numbers, with volunteers working seven days a week from 3 pm to 9 pm, and is planning on making it a 24-hour service.

Another organisation called *Moner Bondhu* that has been working hard to provide psychological support to people

QUICK REFERENCE FOR MEDIA PROFESSIONALS BY WHO

- Take the opportunity to educate the public about suicide.
- Avoid language which sensationalises or normalises suicide, or presents it as a solution to problems.
- Avoid prominent placement and undue repetition of stories about suicide.
- Avoid explicit description of the method used in a completed or attempted suicide.
- Avoid providing detailed information about the site of a completed or attempted suicide.
- Word headlines carefully.
- Exercise caution in using photographs or video footage.
- Take particular care in reporting celebrity suicides.
- Show due consideration for people bereaved by suicide.
- Provide information about where to seek help.
- Recognise that media professionals themselves may be affected by stories about suicide.

of all ages, conducts free seminars and sessions, and offers helpline services for people with mental health issues.

In terms of teenage suicides, Psychologist Dr Mohammad Mahmudur Rahman, who is also an Associate Professor at the Department of Clinical Psychology, University of Dhaka suggests that teachers can play a crucial role in providing a safe space for students. “Though some educational institutes have educational counsellors or mental health support centres, most students avoid seeking help in fear of further stigma from their peers. And the stigmatisation of mental health issues need to be stopped through massive awareness building programmes on campuses,” he says.

He adds that the government should ensure at least one trained psychological counsellor in each educational institution to enable an environment where students can easily seek help.

LET'S TALK

If you or a loved one is considering suicide, please call the emotional support helplines

Helpline Numbers:

- Kaan Pete Roi*
01517-969150
01688-709965
01779-554391
01852-035634
01985-275286

Moner Bondhu
01776632344

<https://www.facebook.com/AskMonerBondhu/>