

# Downplaying child sexual abuse

NAZNIN TITHI

According to Bangladesh Shishu Adhikar Forum, a total of 494 children were raped in the eight months from January till August this year—among them 58 were gang-raped. According to their statistics, 37 disabled children were raped during this time, while 46 were victims of attempted rape.

Later that day, while talking to some of my journalist friends, I brought up the issue again. We talked about the news treatment of incidents of child abuse in newspapers and how such news is often underplayed, being relegated to less important pages. One of them argued that this news should have been published on the front page of the newspaper while another thought other important national issues deserved more attention.

Perhaps it wasn't the right time to talk about rape, because for residents of Dhaka, the most important news of the day was the heavy rainfall in the whole country, the waterlogging and unplanned urbanisation of Dhaka, etc. But I could not help thinking about the horror the child had gone through and the trauma she would suffer, possibly for the rest of her life. And while writing this article, the thought that crossed my mind was maybe right at that moment, somewhere in some remote corner of the country, there were children being sexually abused or raped. The thought might seem negative, but given the increase in the number of child rape incidents of late, I'll admit, such thoughts often come to my mind. We might find reports of a few of the incidents in the next day's newspapers, but many of the cases will remain unreported.

If we take a look at the reports and studies done by organisations that work on child rights issues, we may get a glimpse of the horrific crimes committed against children in the

country. According to Bangladesh Shishu Adhikar Forum, a total of 494 children were raped in the eight months from January till August this year—among them 58 were gang-raped. According to their statistics, 37 disabled children were raped during this time, while 46 were victims of attempted rape. And as Manusher Jonno Foundation (MJF) has reported, at least 15 children died as

of rape victims are schoolchildren), domestic workers have been raped by their employers—a sickening rape culture seems to have engulfed the whole society. The situation is so horrifying that even babies are not spared. According to a study by Brac, around 1.7 children were raped on an average every day in Bangladesh last year.

Let's look at some recent newspaper

Jatrabari on October 1. The list goes on. And yet, that would be only a fraction of the total incidents, since a large number of cases remain unreported.

Lawyers and child rights activists blame the delay in the trial of the accused as the main reason for the alarming rise in crimes of child abuse. Establishment of a separate child rights commission to deal with the issues relating to child abuse and

and Children Repression Prevention Act, 2000 a child is defined as anyone under 16 years whereas according to our Children's Act, 2013 it is 18 years. This contradiction must be removed. Tania Haque, Associate Professor, Department of Women and Gender Studies, University of Dhaka, points out that the above mentioned contradiction makes cases of abuse and sexual harassment of children vulnerable to manipulation, making it difficult to obtain effective results.

While it is the responsibility of the government and the judiciary to improve legal protection for children, we must think seriously about what we can do at the social level to prevent the surge in sexual violence against children. And as a first step, we should look at ourselves. What role are we as adults playing to protect children in our society? Did we, at any point in our lives, protest when we noticed any kind of abuse inflicted on children—maybe on the street or on a public bus or even at home? If the answer is no, then we should first change ourselves and stop being silent spectators.

Although it is true that some cases of child rape have received media attention, especially after outcry on social media, sadly, these do not make for even a fraction of the reported cases of rapes of children. When crimes against children are all pervasive in our society, our efforts to fight these crimes should be persistent and well thought-out. Let us stop trivialising incidents of child rape because it happens all too often.

It goes without saying that news of sexual violence and rape of women and children should always get a prominent place in national newspapers and the electronic media. Not only will this stop downplaying the magnitude of such heinous crimes, but will go a long way in our collective fight against rape culture.

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PHOTO: KAZI TAHSEN AGAZ APURBO

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a result of rape in the nine months since January to September this year. A The Daily Star study done in 2015 found that 82 percent of the rape victims in the country were under the age of 20.

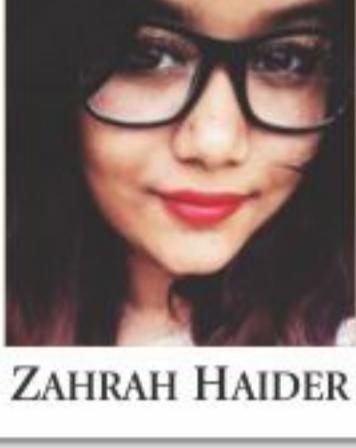
Children are sexually harassed and raped by their neighbours and close relatives, schoolchildren are raped by their teachers and school staff (A study by The Daily Star found that 52 percent

reports. On October 9 this year, a 12-year-old girl was gang-raped on her way home after she fled her employers' house where she had been tortured regularly. A seven-year-old girl was raped by her neighbour in Savar's Begunbaria area on September 26. A three-year-and-nine-month old girl was raped and murdered by a neighbour at the end of July. A seven-year-old girl was found raped and killed in Dhaka's

sexual harassment and holding trial of the cases under a special tribunal, are some of the suggestions they have made.

In addition, the annulment of the special provision in the Child Marriage Restraint Act 2017 is necessary. Under this provision a girl can be married off even if she is not 18 under "special circumstances", which allows minors to be sexually abused. Also, in the Women

# Call-out culture: doing more harm than good?



I T'S no surprise that vigilantism has found its way onto the Internet, namely social media. There's an argument to be made that sometimes it does help to take matters into our own hands, for example when dealing with a problematic individual, especially when it seems as though nothing is being done by law enforcement or other responsible parties. The truth is, there is little or no margin for error when it comes to online vigilantism. It only works when you have concrete, infallible evidence of any misdoings, and even then it's better to let the situation be resolved through the proper official channels.

Tying in with the concept of online vigilantism is "call-out culture." People take it upon themselves to publicly call out either a person or a group of people for a myriad of perceived injustices, and while these instances often generate support and positive feedback, there are many reasons why calling someone out shouldn't be your first port of call.

It seems that over the last few years, young people have taken a more active interest in social justice issues, and have been more vocal about condemning those that perpetuate misogyny, homophobia, racism, and so on. In theory, exposing oppressive behaviour sounds like something everyone

should be practicing. In this day and age, it's virtually impossible to avoid ignorant opinions on social media, no matter how selective you are about your connections. The ideal outcome would be to not only confront, but also to educate people who exhibit ignorance in the hope of contributing to a more progressive

detracts from the actual issues at hand. It is one thing to address a person's mistakes in an attempt to educate them; to dredge up someone's past transgressions for the sake of publicly shaming them is entirely different. Education is the core component of call-out culture, yet there are online activists that

divisive comments. At the same time, it's important to know the risks associated with calling someone out. An alternative to calling out—called "calling in"—was proposed by Ngoc Loan Tran a couple of years ago in a blog called Black Girl Dangerous, and it is a more compassionate and patient approach to confronting

we're publicly shamed from the get-go. Granted, the calling-in approach isn't always effective as there are people that insist on being obtuse, and it isn't always worth spending our time and energy on someone who refuses to listen and be open-minded.

Call-out culture is multifaceted,



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and understanding society.

Of course, this isn't always the case, and the reality can be more problematic. Under the guise of activism, people are using the act of calling out problematic people to merely attack them and to make themselves appear more intelligent. It's all very "holier than thou" and

seem to forget this. We're all guilty of being ignorant about issues at some point in our lives, but it hardly seems fair to face backlash for it months or even years after that.

It's becoming increasingly difficult to ignore ignorance on the Internet, and people shouldn't be allowed to get away with making ignorant and

oppressive or ignorant behaviour rather than putting them on blast straight away. It operates on the understanding that we all make mistakes and that we should be given a chance to understand why we're in the wrong in order to unlearn these behaviours. We're less receptive to this kind of constructive criticism if

and it isn't something you can apply hard-and-fast rules to. It isn't always about exposing people with racist or sexist tendencies, for example.

Coming forward about sexual abuse and harassment, something that has been prominent in the news lately, offers solidarity to those affected. All it takes is one person to speak up

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and call out an abuser, which then encourages others to join the conversation, creating a sort of safe space in the process. This is where online vigilantism comes into play, because naming and shaming an abuser is all well and good provided it doesn't interfere with any legal proceedings, but you also have to be 100 percent sure it doesn't backfire on you. Unfortunately, we live in a world where false accusations are rife, and being wrongly targeted online for something could lead to disastrous consequences. Mob mentality takes over and it results in people receiving a barrage of insults and even death threats, so it's important to bear in mind when calling someone out.

Although the call-out culture began in social justice circles with good intentions, it has been abused and turned into something toxic and damaging. There are so-called activists who have lost sight of what's important and misused the act of calling-out to serve their own misguided intentions. If you see someone exhibiting oppressive or ignorant behaviour, take the time to figure out the best plan of action. To ignore it is to be complicit, and to speak up is to enter uncharted territory as there's no way of predicting how the person will react.

Being tactful is imperative, even if some people are less deserving of our time and diplomacy. We owe it to ourselves to engage with people who express ignorant views because keeping quiet isn't going to change the state of society.

Zahrah Haider is a journalism graduate and freelance writer currently living in the UK.

## CROSSWORD BY THOMAS JOSEPH

**ACROSS**

- 1 Trite
- 6 Glowing rings
- 11 Banish
- 12 Geography class aid
- 13 River part
- 14 Hayride need
- 15 Memo heading
- 17 Filming site
- 18 Subtle pitch
- 22 Jacob's twin
- 23 Sites
- 27 Stay away from
- 29 Kitchen cooker
- 30 Made fancy
- 32 Notion
- 33 Most heavily built
- 35 Yeoman's "yes"
- 38 Question from Caesar

**DOWN**

- 39 Have a banquet for 41 Figure of speech
- 45 Figure of speech
- 45 Make sense
- 46 Yo-Yo Ma's instrument
- 47 Moisten the turkey
- 48 Crooked
- 1 Sleep spot
- 2 Lumber-jack's tool
- 3 Zero
- 4 Heights
- 5 Inclines
- 6 "The War of the Worlds" writer
- 7 In the style of
- 8 Cabin makeup
- 9 Clarinet's cousin
- 10 Transmitted
- 16 Agent, for short
- 18 Future flower
- 19 Norway's capital
- 20 Nymph's pursuer
- 21 Earth regions
- 24 Body of law
- 25 Preceding nights
- 26 Plane fixture
- 28 Muse of music
- 31 Poker prize
- 34 City of New York
- 35 Moby Dick's pursuer
- 36 Luke Skywalker's teacher
- 37 Concludes
- 40 Ump's call
- 42 Sort
- 43 Bullfight cry
- 44 Cut, as hay

## BEETLE BAILEY



## BY MORT WALKER



## BABY BLUES



## BY KIRKMAN & SCOTT

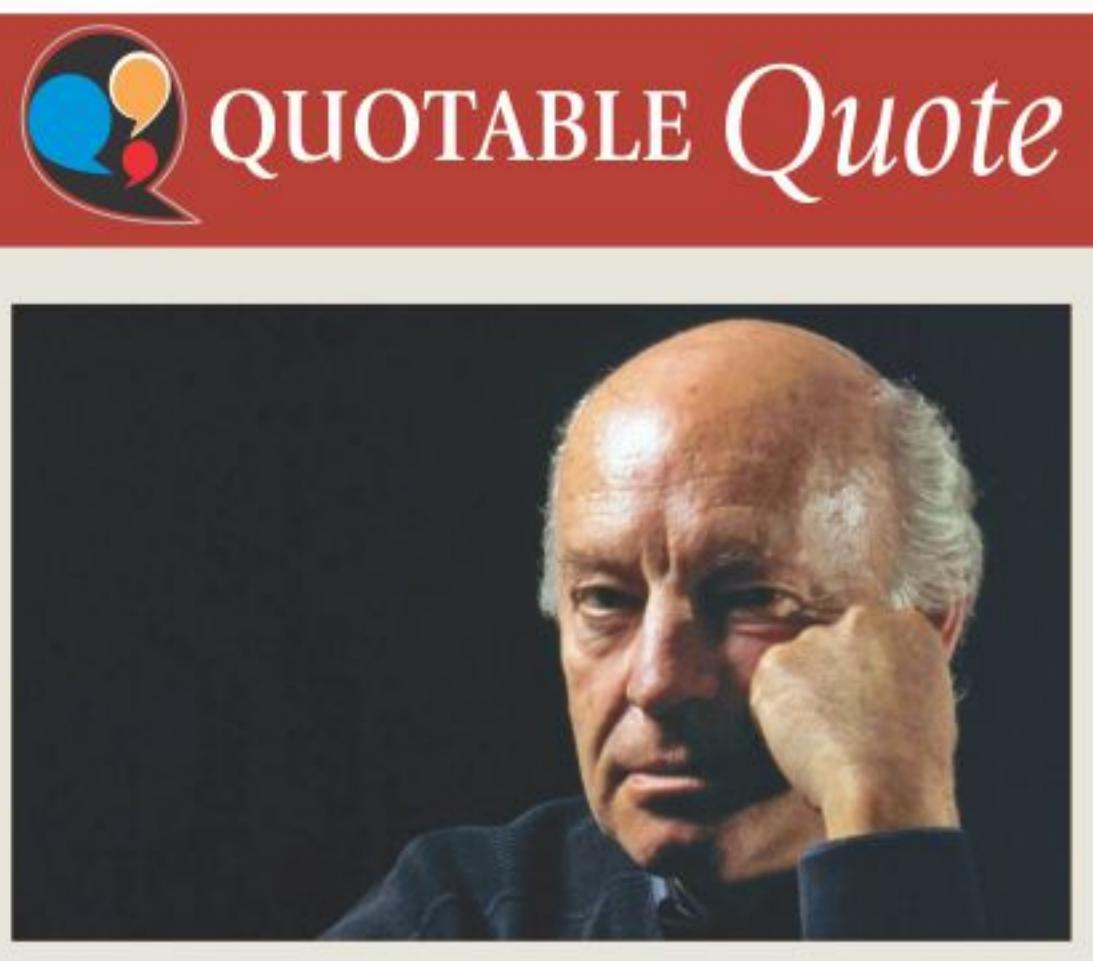
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