

SPOTLIGHT

Over the last month *Star Weekend* surveyed and interviewed 300 people to find the answer to this question: why do child sexual abuse cases not get reported, and what can be done to rectify it? The respondents included social workers who deal with these cases, lawyers, eye-witnesses and 195 child sexual assault survivors themselves.

Of those who self-reported their cases, 31 were rape survivors—but none of them had ever sought legal support or police help. 22 of these survivors, including 12 male respondents, never told anyone about it—neither family nor friends. When asked why, most of the survivors said they were ashamed. “No one will understand, and I allowed the same thing to happen to my younger brother. I didn’t understand that it wasn’t okay,” writes another male survivor who was raped at the age of eight by a domestic helper.

And an even more terrifying one by a female respondent, “I was raped by my father. I did not want my parents to separate.”

What if the survivor had reported the incident? How would the system have protected her? One nine-year-old girl told her mother that her stepfather had raped her. In fact, she told her mother that she was raped several times. Her

pseudonym to protect the identity of the survivor, was even younger when she was raped by her family’s landlord. The accused rapist Latifur stood in the dock scowling, while Tuni’s tearful father Lokman pleaded for the rapist’s bail to be cancelled. The hearing came to a quick and unfavourable end for Lokman because of two reasons: the investigating officer of the rape did not include the forensic doctor’s certificate and Tuni herself was not present.

“She is so young. How do I bring her to court to face her rapist?” says Lokman, pointing out a flaw of the courtroom, “I myself am scared of facing him.” The Child Act 2013 mandates that courtrooms be child-friendly. Tuni has not yet forgotten about her rape. “Uncle hurt me down here,” says the girl, clutching between her legs, when asked what her uncle did to her. “He gave me *bakarkhani* to eat,” she goes on. Her medical reports detail heartbreaking particulars about the state of her tiny body as a result of the incident. “After the rape, the place was inflamed and she kept crying and wetting herself,” says her mother describing the child’s trauma.

Tuni’s hearing was being held at the Dhaka Magistrate Judicial Court, while the family had fled to Kishoreganj district; they commuted four hours each way to come to court. “We moved to Kishoreganj right after the incident



Children are most abused at home  
IMAGE: KAZI TAHSIN AGAZ APURBO

# NOT SEEN, NOT HEARD, NOT BELIEVED



Tuni looking out at Dhaka City  
IMAGE: KAZI TAHSIN AGAZ APURBO

parents separated alright, but now the mother-daughter duo is living in abject poverty. The mother, a Quranic teacher, whose face is always hidden under a niqab, mustered up the courage to take it to court. She faced her daughter’s rapist at a courtroom last Friday and broke down in tears when he was granted bail. Clutching a prayer mat like a talisman, the white-robed, bearded man, who had walked into the courtroom in handcuffs, left without them.

“My lawyers did not show up because I could not pay them,” the mother sobbed at the injustice of it all, “I also need to fight for my *denmohar* without which I cannot survive.” She was crying so much that she was barely incoherent.

**The younger you are**

The same thing happened with three-year-old Tunu at court. Tunu, which is a

because Latifur threatened to ‘finish’ us unless we shut up. I do business in the Dhaka area, where we used to live, so I run into him often, and he pressurises me to withdraw the case,” adds Lokman, “that is why it was important for us that his bail be cancelled.”

The younger the child is the less likely they are to seek institutional support from the police or social workers. Of the people who came forward to participate in the survey, there were only two narrated incidents where the police were involved if the child was under eight years of age. In both cases, the victims were raped. Compared to that, there were eight cases reported to the police for victims who were older. One 17-year-old even sought legal support for cyber sexual harassment. Another male survivor told a social worker about the time a maternal uncle tried to rape him.

**ZYMA ISLAM**

Nasrin Akter Joly, Deputy Director of Girl Child Advocacy Programme, narrates an incident to show how it is difficult to gather evidence for younger victims. “In Shyamoli, a five-year-old girl was sexually assaulted by an older male domestic worker from another apartment. The police questioned the girl to get detailed information about the event, which was traumatising for her so she could not properly provide information,” says Joly, “The elder brother beat up the perpetrator out of frustration, and for this offence, the family was harassed by the police and they had to leave their apartment eventually.”

**The poorer you are**

When asked about involving the police, a staff from Social and Economic Enhancement Programme, an organisation working with street children, said: “We do inform the police but not often because these [incidents] are deemed insignificant [by the police].” The interviewee’s reluctance to seek help from the police is ominous

because street children are undoubtedly the most exposed to sexual violence.

“Almost all the children we rescued from the streets were sexually assaulted, but only one case was picked up by the media,” states Forhad Hossain, the Executive Director of Local Education and Economic Development Organisation (LEEDO), “we do not have the organisational ability to prove that abuse happened, so we don’t report to the police.” Over 200 kids he dealt with in the last three years were under eight years of age.

Social workers who deal with street children were interviewed separately for some more precise numbers on how many such cases they encountered and in which areas, from 2015 to 2017.

Unsurprisingly, the major transport centres and entry-points of the city had the highest number of cases—these include Sadarghat Launch Terminal, Arambagh Bus Terminal, Gulistan and Kamapur Rail Station. 11 of the social workers interviewed by *Star Weekend* worked in those areas, and between 2015 and 2017, they encountered as many as 526 children who were sexually abused. It goes without saying

that the actual number is higher—much higher. In fact, 526 is only slightly less than the annual national approximate that media reports circulate. In the past three years, another organisation, Breaking the Silence, dealt with hundreds of cases of child sexual abuse but only five or six were reported in the media.

Aparajeyo Bangladesh’s Executive Director Wahida Banu has a personal story about the dangers of under reporting by the media. “A policeman was dragging away a street child in handcuffs outside of Dhaka when our NGO worker intervened. The police threatened to harm him so he called a journalist for help,” she describes, “the journalist was just not interested and the child was carried away in handcuffs.” While such a small-scale incident does not reach larger Dhaka-centric national newspapers, local community media can really play a part, Banu thinks.

The other group who can never report sexual violence against them is the massive fleet of underage domestic workers hidden away in city apartment blocks. We interviewed teachers who run centres for these children in

residential neighbourhoods and they all had stories to tell. Beginning from “the 70-year-old grandfather who made her give hand-jobs” to incidences of rape and murder, the one thing that these teachers claimed unanimously is that they cannot get the police involved.

“The girls come to us for a safe haven. If we start calling the police on the employers then we cannot run these centres,” says a teacher. They chose to remain anonymous precisely because of that as well—if it comes to light that they have been talking to reporters then their centres might get shut down.

“The parents or guardians of these girls too are difficult to convince—they have to choose between poverty and rape,” says an interviewee, “One time I called the sister of an eight-year-old girl who was being sexually abused, but she just assumed the girl was making excuses to get out of working.”

“In another incident, a father of a child worker told me it is better than starving,” she adds.

How do you monitor and report these hidden abuses where one party is clearly more powerful than the other? Housing societies and local civic associations like

ladies’ clubs need to step up, according to experts who work with child domestic workers. “Local area management committees exist everywhere and they can definitely play a bigger role in monitoring—maybe have someone designated to deal with gender violence,” says Nasrin Ahmed, who works with a child rights organisation.

**The less able you are**

But it’s not like local committees are always helpful either. They certainly did not report the rape of 17-year-old Farhan. Farhan, whose real name had to be concealed, has Asperger syndrome and attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD). He vehemently opposes being categorised as disabled. “He just cannot concentrate on one thing at a time,” says his mother. Behaviour-wise, she categorises him as a child.

“He was raped for five or six months straight at the Nababganj Boro Masjid. He used to come home and tell me that it hurts. Because he is like a child, he always told me whenever he was hurting,” says the mother. “Nobody would believe me—or him—and I had to watch my child go through this for months,” she says. “When I confronted the father of one of the rapists, he said that I was perverted for even having such thoughts.”

“One used to show me videos on his mobile, while the other hurt me. They

describes. He banged on the door and the boys came out.

Now that there was an eye-witness, the mother alerted their ward commissioner Humayun Kabir. “Humayun is like my uncle and he told me to settle the matter internally, so I agreed,” she says. Why not tell the police and file a case? “I could not decide what to do, so I let the ward commissioner be the best judge of the situation,” she says.

The rapists were brought to a public hearing and publicly beaten with shoes. Ever since the hearing, however, the mother does not let Farhan out of the house. She is afraid that because he is a rape survivor, others might also take their chances with him. Because he has never been through the system, he is yet to get tested for AIDS.

**The burden of proving it happened**

At the end of the day the burden of proving it happened falls on the survivors, and so, they don’t speak out. “We consult lawyers about all cases of sexual violence, but cannot take action for all of them since many lack circumstantial evidence,” says Rukhsana Sultana, Executive Director of Breaking the Silence. In the past decade, the lawyers could only pick up cases of rape—all other categories of violence were brushed aside.



Nababganj Boro Masjid where Farhan was raped  
PHOTO: KAZI TAHSIN AGAZ APURBO

did it in the bathroom. I was on the floor. It was dark,” says Farhan, in short sentences punctuated by long silences.

The mother never sought help from the government. “I’m tired of institutional help. I’ve been trying to get my son into a school for years, but he keeps getting turned away because he is not ‘autistic enough’. On the one hand, he is too autistic to survive in a normal school. So I’ve pulled him out,” she says. She has never received visits from any social workers.

Her chance came when Farhan was discovered in the bathroom with his rapists by Mohammed Saber, the head of a local association called Crescent Club, who saw the boys lead Farhan towards the second floor bathrooms and got suspicious. “Something about it felt strange—I just had a feeling. I followed them and found them inside a bathroom with the door locked,” he

As Farhan’s case shows, if female rape victims are not taken seriously, then males are even less so. According to our survey, only 14 male respondents out of 67 revealed to friends or family that they had been sexually abused. In the case of females, nearly half of the respondents shared. This is made harder by the fact that perpetrators themselves usually originate from inner circles. According to our survey, the victim’s uncle was involved in most of the incidents, followed by religious teachers, home tutors, cousins and staff at school—in that order. When children are up against adults who are allies with family and society, the courtroom and counsellor’s couch moves further and further away.

*Star Weekend is very grateful to all survivors who shared their experiences. Rubana Mussharat and Sharmin Rashid contributed to the data collection. The survey was circulated on Facebook, including the women’s group Meye: a Sisterhood.*